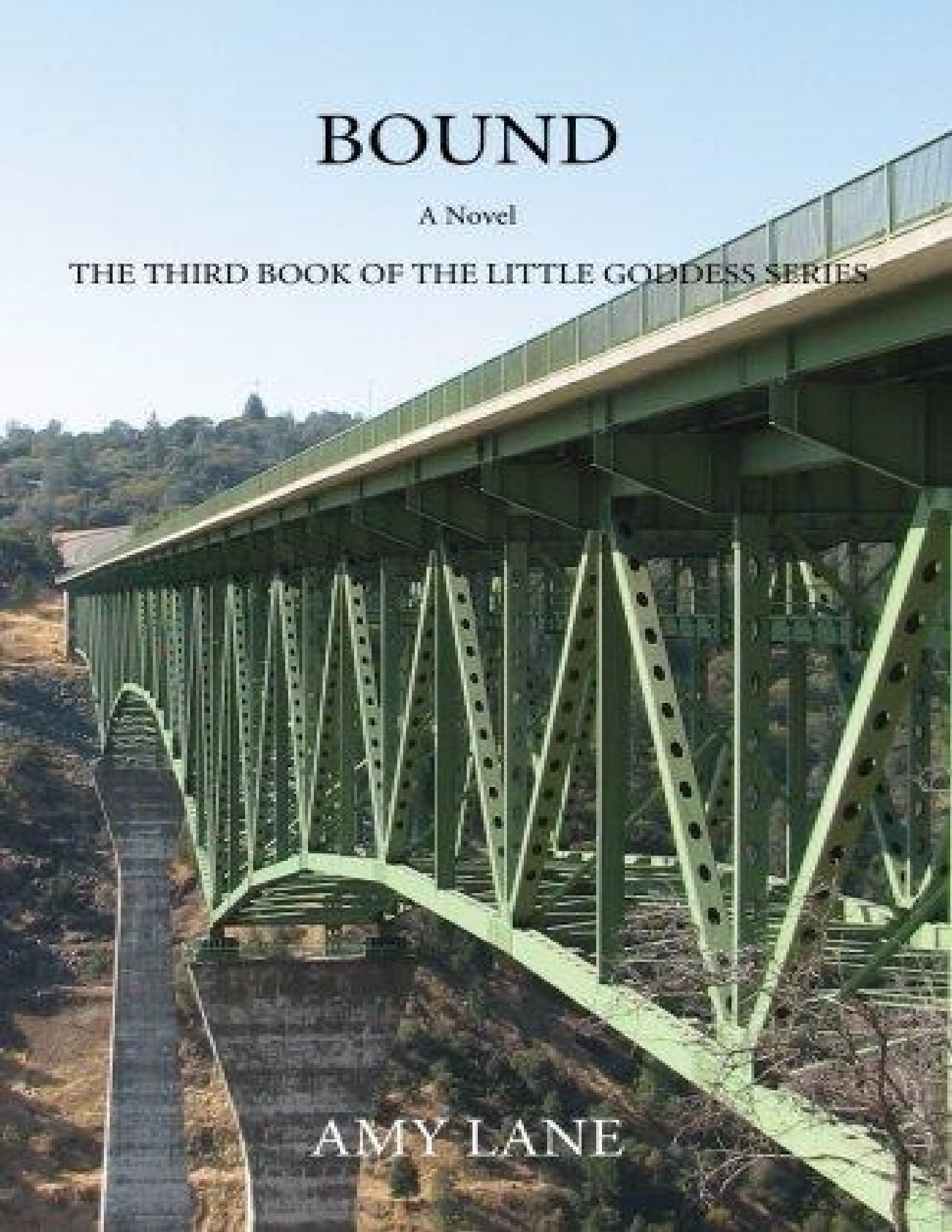


BOUND

A Novel

THE THIRD BOOK OF THE LITTLE GODDESS SERIES

AMY LANE



Bound

The Third Book in the Little Goddess Series

by Amy Lane

As always, to my family.

Mate, T, and Q—my beautiful boys, you will never know how much I rejoice in my husband and our sons.

Chicken Boo and Ladybug, my daughters, this one is especially for you, because you must never let anyone let you feel less than powerful. Not even your mother.

This is also to my family and friends who really love the books—thank you. I can say it effusively or shyly or half-embarrassed, but it all amounts to my extreme gratitude that you read my books and love them, even when you know that my house is a pit and my kitchen is a slough of despond and my bathroom is a mildew collection experiment for extreme scientists. Thank you—you'll never know how much.

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And finally, thanks to my blogging-buddies, because you read me every day—how do you do it? I drive myself mad! Roxie, lady-in-red, Starfish, Needletart, Rae, Coach Susan, Mother of Chaos, Liz, bells, Julie, tam-tam, Yarn Harlot, and so on and so on and so on—thank you all for the definition of unconditional support. *JUST KEEP SWIMMING!!!!*

Wreathes of flowers bind me tight

*As my lover takes me with care and might
My legs are bound around his hips
My mouth is pressed against his lips
I breathe because my body must
This is why I plunge against his thrusts
My heart has sworn its silent oaths
My body too has pledged its troths
One troth to him with whom I reign
And one to him who keeps me sane
One troth to one I keep from death
And one to the ghost with whom I've slept
As my soul is chained with silken threads
To every lover in my bed
I'm tied with love to the land I see
And those who dwell are bound to me.
My fate was made with choices free
Bound to the truth I'm bound to be.*

CORY

Ou'e'hm & du'e'alle

"I've made calls and put a compulsion on all of your paperwork to make sure it goes through," Green assured me earnestly, the planes taking off overhead making it difficult to hear. He was dressed in classic business sidhe—crème colored wool suit, a dark green brocade tie, and a darker crème colored trench coat to keep off the steady rain that made this mid January day just a little drearier. The only thing that wasn't plain and classic about Green's outfit was the

green and gold scarf I'd knitted him for Christmas, and, of course, Green's hip-length braid of butter yellow hair. As for the scarf, what else do you give an immortal sidhe lover who ruled all of Northern California and the central coastlands to boot? And maybe because he had enough magic and power at his disposal to make concrete jungles erupt into fantasy gardens, he lived simply, with bare clean wood and homemade quilts and few, if any decorations in his room. In fact, I thought wretchedly, as he searched my plain human face with his fantastically large and wide-spaced green eyes, the only indulgence Green seemed to have in his life right now was that raggedly hand-knit cashmerino scarf, and me. He touched my hair restlessly with his long fingers, interrupting my thoughts. The inhumanly beautiful, clean, anime perfect and heartbreaking lines of his face were marred by worry. I reached up—way, way up, because he was in the top half of six feet and I was in the bottom half of five—and I stroked the pointed curve of his elfin ear. Nobody else could see those pointed ears—only the preternatural, or me, a human with preternatural gifts, and I felt an ownership to this part of him that the rest of the world couldn't have. But he was leaving, and the rest of the world was going to have him, and right now all I could do was try very hard to smile and let him know I would be all right.

"You should get right in," he was saying. "You'll be able to register by phone tomorrow, but you must take the classes we picked out or it won't work." Including Renny, Nicky, Mario, La Mark, Bracken and I, there were six of us from Green's hill enrolling in classes at Sac State. The commute from Foresthill was over an hour, so in the best interest of time and gas, we scheduled ourselves through the early afternoon Mondays through Thursday, with breaks in between to meet. Before I'd begun dating a vampire, I had been alone, a mean-spirited punk-Goth bitch who hated the world. But once you've truly loved another, as I had loved Adrian, and once his family took you in as theirs, well, you're never truly alone again. My family and I were planning to stick close, out in the big, bad, human world.

I nodded, to ease Green's worries, and tried to keep my face from crumpling. I'd assured Green that I'd be able to handle his traveling because his traveling kept our people consolidated, and it kept enemies from descending on us like nightmare plagues from hell, and I didn't want him walking into these strange sidhe and fairy halls (or human boardrooms) worrying about me falling apart. However, I'd just spent four months living in another city, and it had—in a very physical, magical, and literal way—almost killed me to be apart from Green for that time, in spite of our visits back and forth. Now I was back in the foothills

and I had two other men bound to me by supernatural and emotional ties, and watching him get out of the Suburban and unload his luggage was still like watching my right lung rip itself out of my body to go toddling off among the vampires in play. It was excruciatingly painful, and it just plain felt wrong.

"What name is it under?" I asked, trying to be practical. My full Christian name was Corinne Carol-Anne Kirkpatrick. The elves feared that since I was essentially a magically charged human, I was as susceptible to preternatural influences as they were, but without the experience of knowing what was hostile and what was not. They thought that anyone who knew my full name would have too much power over me. Mostly, I agreed. Unfortunately, *which* name I was supposed to take had been a big fat meaty bone of contention.

"Whatever name you like," Green said gently, knowing exactly where my thoughts were headed. A part of me wished he would have stepped up and claimed me, writing "Cory Green" on my paperwork with absolute authority, because he did things like that sometimes when my health or my safety was at stake. But the more grown up part of me was glad, very glad that he trusted me to follow my heart, and trusted that my heart would always beat for him. Still, I had never been good at lying, and my misery and indecision must have been written plainly on my face.

"Hey, Cory luv..." Green murmured tenderly. "I'll be back. Bracken will keep you safe, right?"

I looked over my shoulder at Bracken, my other sidhe lover, who was standing by the family's big grey Suburban under the rainy sky. He was a darker haired, darker eyed, darker spirited, insanely tall and beautiful counterpoint to Green. Right now, in spite of the fact that I was in Green's arms, and had shared Green's bed the night before, Bracken was looking at me like I was the only star in his dark night sky, and he was afraid I'd lose my gravity and fly into cosmic dust and his entire focus was on keeping me whole.

I looked back at Green with a sad, weak parody of a smile. "It doesn't matter if it's your left lung or your right lung, *ou'e'hm*," I said after a fraught moment when I'd twisted my face trying not to cry. "It's still a part of you that you need to live and you miss it." And with that, I lost the battle, and the tears spilled over, and Green stood for a moment, stroking my shoulder-length mud-red hair and allowing me to mess up his lovely off-white coat with my mascara and my weakness and my humanity. *Ou'e'hm*, I'd called him—my leader and

lover. On days like today, I wondered what in me had given me the right.

"I'll be back in two weeks, *ou'e'eir*," he murmured, making me wonder all over again and kissing my face in a dozen places and licking the salt off my lips. "Two weeks—it's nothing, right? It's a moment. It's a heartbeat..." And his words trailed off and he looked at Bracken helplessly, because his plane left in an hour and he barely had enough time as it was. Bracken came behind me and wrapped his arms around my shoulders, and Green disentangled himself from me with one last frantic kiss. In the end, it was Bracken who had to endure my miserable sniffing on his shirt and Bracken who had to spend the next fifteen minutes in the car putting my little tiny anguished pieces back together after Green disappeared inside the airplane terminal in a flash of crème colored coat and shockingly bright sunshine hair.

An hour later, we were all standing in the lobby of the Sac State administration building, wishing we were back at Green's hill drinking hot cocoa instead. The building itself has a bright, ethnic mural on its front, but inside, it's as dreary and as sterile as any state building on the planet everywhere. I huddled in Bracken's oversized Sacramento Kings sweatshirt, shifting uncomfortably as my hair, still soaked from the run from the parking structure to the building, dripped steadily onto my shoulders, and tried not to look any more uncertain than I actually felt. Bracken was about a hairs breadth away from tucking little ol' me under his arm and bolting out of the building as it was.

I had to sigh. Another semester, another school, and as much as I had wanted to leave San Francisco, and as much as I had business here in Sacramento to attend to, I was remembering once again that the bureaucracy of education sucked large.

The student in front of me—a boy a little older than me, dressed just like Bracken in a sweatshirt, denim shorts and flip flops on this soggy day—moved forward and I heard Renny behind me sighing. "It's about time."

I turned my head towards her and Nicky and grinned. "What's the matter, Ren—spoiled?" Last semester we had both been enrolled in CSUSF. Green had paid our tuition, called a few people, pulled a few strings and voila! Instant enrollment. But last semester Renny and I had both been grief stricken and traumatized by the death of our boyfriends, and coping with the day to day mechanics of our life had consisted of ordering pizza we had no intention of eating so we could leave it for the sprites. Those little tiny domestic

housekeepers adored Green, their leader, and doted on Renny and I. But this semester, Green was forced to travel extensively to consolidate the preternatural holdings he'd expanded (to put it mildly) this Christmas, and I'd assured him that we could take care of our own enrollment.

Nicky rolled his yellow eyes—he turned into a bird in his off-hours—and his grin, under his rust and black colored hair made him look younger than Renny and I for a moment, when, in fact, he was nearing twenty-four. I turned twenty this summer, after Adrian died. I'm not even sure if I remembered the day when it passed.

"Not at all," Renny said loftily, her piquant little face assuming an easy air of superiority, "I'm just accustomed to being treated according to my status."

Nicky and I laughed, and so did Mario and La Mark who were standing behind Renny and Nicky. Mario is 5'11" of Hispanic sex appeal, and La Mark a scant 5'8" of sweet dark-chocolate intelligence. They had met Green after trying to attack his people—in fact, Mario's mate was accidentally killed in the attack itself. After four days of watching Green take care of his people, mentally and physically, they had sworn to defend us all to the death, and since they could both turn into big predatory birds, just like Nicky, it wasn't an idle threat. That's just what kind of leader Green was—and the way we stood together, like a group of tourists in a foreign country, said something about how much of a family you got to be when you were of an age, and not exactly human.

Bracken moved restlessly next to me, breaking my thoughts, and I reached out a hand to touch his. His fingers, long and rough and warm, wrapped around my hand, and I tried not to wince. He saw it anyway, and pulled my wrist up for inspection.

"Ellis has no fucking finesse," he growled, glaring balefully at the two nasty rips at my vein and I was forced to agree.

"He's young," I said mildly, defending the overzealous vampire in spite of my pain. He had been young when he died—around seventeen, when Adrian, my first love, my beloved, my dearly departed, had brought him over as a fellow vampire, and it had been barely a year since. Ellis was still learning that life as a vampire was—in spite of the violence of death and the blood letting that sustained him—still much gentler than life on the streets. He was also learning that taking the blood of his queen could not, by necessity, be as rough as the games he played with his kiss-mates. I was, after all, only mortal.

But Bracken was possessive, and angry at having to share me night after night, even when the sharing was blood-letting and not sex. I wasn't a vampire myself, and in order to bind the others to me, they had to know me by taste and by smell. Before Adrian had died, he marked me three times by blowing his soul through my own—I could still see a multi-dimensional mark on my neck, glowing in Adrian purple, when I looked at my mirror reflection with power in my eyes. When the vampires took my blood, they knew what I felt and what I needed, and vice versa. And what they needed was a queen—a leader, someone who could give them a character and a personality as a group. I was their old leader's girlfriend—when he died, I inherited his kiss of children.

I wouldn't have minded adopting the kiss, per se, but Bracken was bound to me by magic—if I was ever unfaithful to him without his permission, the binding would break his heart, and then his body. My infidelity would mean his death, and this meant that, just to be on the safe side, he was forced to watch, night after night, as another creature—man or woman—sank teeth into the tender, sweet flesh of my wrist. Elves, as a whole, were non-monogamous, non-possessive sorts. Green himself got his power and earned his loyalty from sex—he could arouse and heal nearly any boo-boo, physical or emotional, with a big, sexual kiss. He and Adrian had fallen in love when he had tried to heal Adrian of a miserable childhood, and they had been non-monogamous lovers for a century and a half. That was when Adrian stumbled upon me and the three of us became...

Well, mostly we just became.

Bracken is also a sidhe, an elf with serious power, but he had been raised by lower fey parents who had loved for several hundred mortal life times. He and Adrian had been brothers of the spirit, lovers of the body, and loving his best friend's girl was not a thing Bracken took lightly. And blood was, to Brack, what sex was to Green—it was the element he controlled, the element he got his power from. Having to sit and watch as others took my blood was like being aroused to the point of blue balls for him, and he worried about the drain on me as well. Bracken was not so willing to excuse the rangy, young, jumpy undead kid who had visited my room two nights ago and asked to be bound by blood.

"He should have fed before he came," he grumbled, placing a delicate, conciliatory kiss on my scabbed over wounds. I should have asked Green to heal them, I thought mournfully, but last night we'd been making love because we loved each other and healing had been the last thing we'd been thinking of.

Besides, something about the power exchange of the blood sharing had made the vampire bites harder and harder to heal. I ran my other hand over Bracken's face, soothing him, and smiled to lighten his mood.

"He did feed before he came," I said drolly, and my other beloved, my magically wedded mate, had to smile at that. Feeding is extremely sexual for vampires, and as a sorceress—albeit a rookie one—my blood is apparently the equivalent of eating a chocolate éclair soaked in almond liqueur flavored sex hormones. Watching the blond, poignantly featured, beautiful vampire shudder, moan, and spill in his jeans at the simple taste of my blood had made Bracken...well, the vampire hadn't been the only one to come in my room that night.

Bracken's smile faded, and his eyes darted nervously around the beige tile and dirty white walls of the admin building. The actual offices, to our left, were recently remodeled and a little less depressing, but we had another half an hour to go, and Bracken was getting edgy. Enrolling in college with me and the others had not been his idea—it had been Green's.

"For one thing," Green pointed out reasonably after Bracken had spit up trail mix all over himself when it had been brought up, "You're third in line to lead this place, and at the moment the only people besides Cory and myself with any knowledge of human business practices are all vampires and can't function during the day."

Bracken's eyes had grown so big I wondered if he were choking and thought frantically that it wasn't possible to do the Heimlich maneuver on someone a foot and a half taller than you. "Am not!" He gasped in complete disbelief.

I'd stared up at Green from my place on the big white couch (as usual, between Bracken and Green) in complete surprise. "I thought Arturo was next in line," I said on a squeak, referring to Green's second sidhe in command and best friend. Last summer, before Adrian had been killed, Green had showed me a list of people that his property was deeded to—it had gone from Green to Adrian to Arturo to Grace—Arturo's vampire girl-friend—and then to me. A lot had happened since then, but I was as surprised as Bracken that this change in succession was part of it.

"He was," Green said softly, "Until we blew touch, blood, and song through every preternatural creature in Northern California. The touch we used

was sex, Cory. The power spill goes from me, to you, to Bracken, to Andres, to Nicky."

"To me!" Nicky squealed from his place on the pillows at our feet. We'd been watching movies at the time, and one of the other high elves had just put in the last disc of *The Return of the King*, the extended version. "Somebody had better boink Grace and Arturo, then," Nicky blurted, "Because I'm set decoration..."

"Oh please," Bracken snapped. "You're like fifth in line—by the time it came down to that you'd be dead anyway." He looked at Green sharply. "So would I," he said thoughtfully. "I'm bound to Cory—if she goes I go."

"Yes," said Green patiently, "And then Arturo *would* lead. But if I go, she's going to need someone she's bound to by magic to help her keep things running. And if you go, she stays, and that's why Andres, because he's bound by blood, and that's why Nicky—yes, Nicky, you do have some responsibilities to this hill besides sharing Cory's bed—and this whole discussion is beyond depressing! Bracken, you don't have any hard and fast duties besides taking care of Cory, your father is hale and hearty and will be taking care of the lower fey for many hundreds of years to come so you don't need to worry too much about that right now. Really, the only thing you have to worry about is our beloved. And since she's going to be at school four days a week, this is the best way to take care of her."

A year before, I would have fought like hell for the right to go to my own goddamned classes. Since then, I'd been attacked, mind-raped, heart-broken, and Goddess-knew-what-else. If Green said I needed a bodyguard to attend college, I was soooo there.

But now I looked at Bracken with sympathy. He hated the human world. He could deal with locals up near us with the use of glamour and in the company of other of elves or vampires, but from what I'd gathered (both from Bracken and the other elves at Green's hill) Bracken's primary reason for coming out and being with the humans was to get laid. Of course, now that he was welded to me for life, that wasn't a consideration anymore, and the idea of using his, well limited communication skills on an almost full time basis was as anathematic to Bracken as not trying to love the world would be to Green.

"You'll like it *due'alle*." I said softly, as we moved up one more person in line. I used his elfish title—it meant 'male equal of my heart'—to make him

happier. Green kept his people safe by using sex to bind them—he couldn't be my *due'alle*, and I knew it made Bracken happy to have his own specific place in my heart. "We can study together."

Bracken grunted, a sound that could best be described as 'noncommittal'.

"You can come running with me!" I tried again, trying to keep my voice light. Cheering Bracken up beat the hell out of pining for Green.

Bracken looked at me as though I'd spouted a second head, which was now lecturing him on quantum physics. "I can come what?"

"Running," I said brightly. "You, me, & Renny are going to have a two hour break between our morning classes and our afternoon classes—I was going to go running before lunch."

Bracken blinked at me, then scowled. "You're too skinny and you have no breasts," he growled. "Why would you need to go running?"

I grimaced. I had been sick this winter—more than sick, actually. For a week I had balanced on the fine tensile nylon line between life and death, sometimes dangling so precariously over the edge that Adrian himself had offered to catch me if I fell. My body had yet to fully recover, and Green and Bracken would carry the scars of almost losing me so soon after losing Adrian for a long time.

"I need to go running for precisely that reason!" I answered back. "I got winded walking from the parking lot to the administration building. If I started exercising, I'd get my strength back faster."

Bracken looked sideways at me, a crease forming between his eyebrows, as though he were deliberating the subject.

"It's not like you can tell me no, Bracken!" I burst out. "I just thought you might like to come with me, that's all."

"You could walk with me," he said "In the mornings."

I was so surprised I almost tripped over my own sodden sneakers. As I had discovered this last month while sharing Green's and Bracken's bed, elves needed to walk their land, touch their (usually bare) feet to the land of their hill, to the place where they, or their leaders, drew power. It was comfort and

nourishment, both physical and magical sustenance to them. When we shared a bed, Bracken often disappeared at dawn, to walk the earth around the two hundred or so acres that made up Green's land.

I smiled softly at him, absurdly touched. It was generous offer, and I didn't take it lightly. "It's your private time, beloved," I said, my voice rough. "I couldn't intrude on that." I tried humor. "Besides—you tend to move in hyperspeed, and I couldn't keep up." All of the Goddess' creatures could do that—it's what happens when the will of the Goddess to keep her creatures alive in God's world overrode the electricity that normally fired the synapses.

"I would carry you," Bracken replied with dignity, but he had a slight smile of his own, and I could see that he knew the impracticality of the solution.

"Someday you must," I told him seriously, bringing his big, graceful hand to my lips to kiss, "But since it won't help make me stronger, for now I'll just run the track during my break."

Bracken sighed. "I'll have to watch you then," he said fretfully. "Because if I try to run in the human way I'd still outdistance you four laps to one."

I looked up at him, way, way up, to his carelessly cut hair and the curved point of his ears that only those of us from Green's hill could see, and to the inhumanly beautiful, stormy and dark features of his face. "Why Bracken," I murmured, "That was almost a joke."

"Bracken made a joke?" Renny asked from right behind me.

"All things are possible," Bracken said loftily, looking down at Renny with affection in his eyes. She was fairly presentable today, in black jeans, tennis shoes, a fitted white T-shirt and a hooded jacket the color of mustard. After Mitch died, she had run around wearing mostly one piece dresses and nothing else because it made morphing into a 95 lb. tabby cat just that much easier. The fact that she was dressed in regular clothes, with her hair pulled back into a perky pony-tail meant that she had found a measure of self-possession that we had all been afraid she'd never get back.

"I'll believe it when I wet my pants," Nicky said dryly, and that did make me laugh.

"We were just talking about going running," I said brightly, making sure Mario and La Mark could hear me too. "I wanted to start during that long break

we have between classes and was wondering if anybody wanted to join me.”

Four pairs of inhuman eyes regarded me silently, the thoughts behind them clearly puzzled. Of course, I thought, shaking my head. When you spent part of your life running or flying around in animal form, with an insanely high metabolism, staying physically fit was a given.

"Nevermind," I sighed. "I'll go by myself."

"But not out of my sight," Bracken said firmly, and I resisted the urge to put my face in my hands. I was young, and mortal, and in spite of the fact that occasionally I shot brilliant light and tremendous metaphysical power out of my mouth or my hand or various other parts of my body, I was still much more human than the people I lived with.

"No, Bracken," I said, with humor, "I'll never be out of your sight."

His arm fell lightly around my shoulders, and for a moment, it seemed there was a peace in the breath of our intense and restless relationship.

And because he was Bracken, he had to completely fuck it up.

He bent down, blowing my hair away from my ear, and for a moment, all I could think of was being with him, warm and dry and skin to skin. "Have you decided," he asked softly, "What name you're going to put on your forms."

"Oh Goddess," Renny snapped from behind me, "Not this fight again!" Elves were not the only ones with preternatural hearing.

Bracken regarded Renny with irritated indulgence. "This isn't your fight."

"It is when your argument takes over the hill," Renny grumbled, and even I, with my mortal senses could hear Nicky say "Amen."

"Hush, you two," Mario said behind them, and I looked at him gratefully. He was a steady young man, and he had loved his mate with everything in him. I knew the signs of grief so well in myself I could detect the signs in him to hang on to logic and sense and order so that you didn't lose yourself in the chaos of your own heart.

"Now see what you've done?" I asked Bracken wryly, determined not to raise the same ruckus here in public that we'd raised at home. "You've upset the children."

"If they were our children," he grunted, "I could see why they'd be so interested in your name."

"They're interested because we screamed at each other for an hour in middle of the living room with Green there trying to break us up," I replied dryly.

"We didn't scream," Bracken denied. "We discussed." His lips quirked up. "Loudly."

"It's only for the human world," I said after a moment. "I hardly live here anymore."

Bracken sighed, and I saw his eyes dart back and forth among the tan tile and beige stucco walls. "It's your world," he said unhappily. "I want to be a part of it."

"The whole point in changing my name was to keep me under the radar." I explained patiently, unsure if I'd been able to articulate this to him rationally after he'd jumped all over me during the first discussion. "And I love you, Bracken, but I don't think Cory op Crocken is going to make me any more nondescript."

Bracken frowned and looked at me, hard. "We had that hellacious fight," he said after a moment, "and I still don't think you understand why we're changing your name." He shrugged, waved vaguely at our surroundings. "The humans can think whatever they want. They wouldn't know your value if you stood on top of that big glass building in the middle of the campus and changed the shape of the campus with a whim. And any supernatural being can see you glow from a mile away—mostly because they've had our blood pass through their skin. We're not changing your name to keep you 'under the radar'. We're changing your name so that nobody with power can call your name and make you do their bidding."

"But..." I trailed off unhappily. I looked ahead and realized that there was only one more person in the line—the good looking kid in the shorts and sweatshirt—and my time to actually make this decision was rapidly coming to an end.

"Bracken," I said after another brief, echoing second, "Any name I take here, that's going to be my name."

"But not all your name," he said reasonably.

"It's a human tradition, not an elfin one!" I exclaimed, since it was the one argument I hadn't brought up during our first loud discussion.'

"And you are human," he said calmly. "And I am tied to your mortality."

I rubbed my face with my hands. "Cory Green is the perfect name for me," I said, almost to myself. "It's plain, it's quiet—nobody would notice a Cory Green or give a shit if she passes or fails." And maybe this was the root of the whole argument in the first place, not whether or not Green had prior claim to me and my name.

"You are not a plain person," Bracken said, and for the first time since he brought it up, I heard the beginnings of anger in his voice. "You have people willing to die for you—including me. It is an old name, a good one, and it will protect you when you need it. If you don't give enough of a shit about yourself, would you at least wear my name for me?"

I felt the beginnings of tears in my eyes. I turned towards him, standing on tip-toe. "Bracken..." I began, "I don't like to be noticed..."

"Too goddamned bad." Bracken's language was growing foul, I thought wretchedly. Not that he didn't swear, but the word he used was usually Tuck', and it was usually a verb. Here he was, swearing back at me—I was having a bad effect on him.

"Next." We had been standing close, locked in intimate conversation, and the next available registrar had apparently been trying to get my attention for some time. I sighed, touched his smooth cheek with my small, rough hand, and turned to the vacant chair at the far end of the room. Bracken, disregarding all line protocol, went to follow me, and I turned and waved him back. His face took on a thunderous look, but the next registrar opened up, and we were holding up the line for everybody else so he grudgingly turned to the window right next to mine.

The woman helping me had her extension braids pulled back into a bun, and a sweet, wry smile splitting her mocha tinted face in two. She could have been anywhere between twenty-five and forty-five, and she looked to where I was looking as I sat down, her gaze taking in Bracken, discomfort and unhappiness making his back ramrod straight and his beautiful face—even with

the glamour to make him more human, he was beautiful—stormy and grim.

"Mmm hmm..." she harrumphed. "That is one good looking piece of pissed off man."

I shook my head at him, and turned back to my business. "And he's all mine," I said dryly, because even from her place on the other side of the Plexiglas, the woman could tell that there were equal parts good and bad in that statement.

"Well, you hold onto him," she said wisely. "You never know when life is going to rip a prime piece of man flesh like that right out of your hands."

An image of Adrian crossed my mind, his face sober and excited as he lowered his head for a kiss, followed by the memory Green's profile as he turned away, swinging his yellow, yellow hair behind him. "You're right about that." I sighed, casting one last look at my intense beloved. He looked frustrated and uncomfortable, sitting in the human-sized chair that was, undoubtedly, too small for him, and answering questions that were either personal or completely irrelevant to an elf who didn't even have a legitimate social security number.

The clerk—her nametag said 'Liz'—smiled at me again, and then got down to business. "I'm sorry," She said apologetically, "I can't seem to read this here..." She pointed to a blank space on the registration sheet I'd handed her. Green's compulsion probably had her seeing a blur, so I could decide on what my name was going to be, and dammit, I hadn't come up with an answer in line.

I looked at the space with deer-shot eyes, took a deep breath and opened my mouth, praying the name that would solve all my personal problems would just magically issue from my throat. Restlessly I touched the third finger of my left hand, where a ring would be, if we'd been married the human way, and then I spoke. "Cory," I said, and I swallowed. "Cory op Crocken Green."

BRACKEN

Corinne Carol-Anne Kirkpatrick op Crocken Green

Her voice was still rough from being sick for so long, but I would have heard her add my name to hers if she'd still been home, and I'd been stuck in this cheerless, miserable room, answering inane questions from the colorless little

creature sitting in front of me.

I hate the human world.

"Cory op Crocken Green," she said again, her voice stronger, my father's name falling like smooth shiny stones from her child's mouth.

"Oh, yes," The woman across from her said, "I see it now."

"Your name, uhm, sir?" Said the little translucent blond thing across from me. I scared her. "Bracken," I said firmly, hoping my voice would carry to Cory the way hers had carried to me. "Bracken op Crocken Green."

The rest of registration involved her punching buttons on her keyboard and me handing over Green's check, so I was able to hear the others, as they sat down, and was only mildly surprised to hear "Renny. Renny Hammond Green.", "Dominic Kestrel Green.", "Mario Lopez Green." and "La Mark Holden Green" come from the others as they came forward to register.

Cory caught the names too, and when she saw the surprise on her registrar's face, she said "It's a family thing." In her dry way, as she stood up to walk towards me, then, as her eyes—a green-hazel halfway between my brown-hazel and Green's emerald green—met my grateful gaze, she added, "I married in."

"Good choice," the woman said with a wink, "But you need a ring to prove it!" And then she turned towards her next victim, and I had Cory all to myself.

"Thank you," I said gruffly, touching the third finger of her left hand where, if we were human, my ring would rest. I was willing her to understand what it meant to me, that she would take my name, even though I'd taken her in marriage against her will. Against both our wills, actually, but I, at least, had been planning to ask her before I'd been bespelled into the ceremony.

Her face was small, with a strong nose, a pointed chin, and wide, low cheekbones, but her plainness was never what I saw when I looked at her. I saw her heart, moving gracefully over her features like clear, deep water over a rock bed. A spring flood crossed her face, and I was left, breathless with her, waiting to see what her quick tongue would make of it.

"Thank *you*," she said simply, not meeting my eyes in that way she had when her heart was saying volumes, but she was only going to allow a little bit

of it to fall from her tongue. "It was...it's nice to use your family name," she said at last. What was going through her mind, I wondered? Green told me in this last month that when he dipped into her thoughts, her words were formal and poetic. What came out of her mouth was usually colloquial and human, like she had to dumb down her words for the world to understand her. Green said it felt like a person who spoke two languages fluently, making that seamless translation from one language to the other. For Corinne Carol Anne Kirkpatrick op Crocken Green, who, when I'd met her, said "fuck" more than any other person I'd ever met, it was habit to translate her heart's poetry into gutter spew.

"What are you thinking?" she asked, shaking her head at me. Absently she pulled her hair back with one hand, leaving it a damp, curly mess at the back of her head.

"I'm thinking you two should get out of my line," the blond creature said humorlessly behind us, and Cory laughed at her amiably.

"C'mon, Mr. op Crocken Green," She said gaily, "Let's drag the rest of our children back into the rain."

"Did you hear them?" I asked, trying to breathe with love for her pressing on my chest like a sweet weight.

"Yeah," she said shyly. "It was...it was wonderful, wasn't it?" She smiled at me then, that whole unshuttered smile that she kept behind her wall of words so often.

"You are their Queen," I said seriously, and she shrugged.

"I'm Green's girl," she responded, not comfortable with her place in our lives. Turning, she made sure the others were following us, and said "Hey—who's driving back?" As we stepped from the electronic doors into the rain.

"Not you," La Mark answered in panic. I couldn't remember her ever driving him anywhere, but it was a readily acknowledged fact by everyone but Cory that driving was on her short list of things she didn't do well.

"You whine like a mule," she quoted with dignity. "You're still alive."

"Yeah," muttered the young man under his breath, "But that's one pair of underpants I'm never wearing again."

Mario guffawed next to him. "I *told* you!" He howled into the air. "But nooo...you said, 'After what we survived this winter, what could be worse than Goshawk!'"

Cory turned to them, her face alight with banter. "Aw fuck you, Mario!" she exclaimed, "What did I ever do to you?"

"Uhm, almost killed me?"

"Renny's way worse than I am!" she shot back, and I watched her, bantering with these young people who had been raised in the human world and felt just what I knew I would feel coming with her to school—a place she'd revered since before Adrian. I felt like she was leaving me alone in this place, where the people were so ignorant she had to translate the speech from her heart in order to survive.

She'd been walking backwards, exchanging friendly insults with Renny and holding my arm for balance, when suddenly her hold on my arm grew frantic and she fell backwards onto the ground, catching her fall with her elbows and then pitching her head forward to hang it between her knees.

In half a heartbeat we had gathered around her, sheltering her from the surprised eyes of the other students hurrying between the psych building and the media center, and I bent to pull her out of the water streaming from the sidewalk. I noticed that the others kept wrinkling their noses, throwing their heads around as though they had heard something unpleasant, but for the most part, our attention was focused on Cory.

"Wait..." she murmured. "Just..." She squeezed her eyes, and I knew that expression because I'd held her so many times when her body had been wounded and I knew what her first order of defense was.

"Everybody out of the way," I ordered, scooping her out of the water and turning towards the big yellow trash can outside of the administration building. Her body heaved against me, and she tilted her head to be sick. She heaved again, and again and again, while I held her, helplessly, and the rest of our people watched her in shock in the pouring rain.

Eventually her body stopped spasming, and Renny said "Follow me—there's a lounge and a bathroom in here," And she led us to one of the older, squat, brick shaped two story buildings past on the East side of the campus. We

went through the door and then took a quick right into an old lounge—ugly chrome and formaldehyde furniture, and, Goddess be praised, a couch. I laid Cory on the couch and sheltered her shivering, chattering body with my shoulders. We were all soaked to the bone, and a part of me thought miserably to the long trip home in wet clothes, and about how she had just gotten better and now she'd be sick again, but the more immediate part of me was wondering what in the fuck had just happened.

Renny tapped me on the shoulder and said "We'll be right back." Then she and La Mark trotted back out into the rain again.

I nodded and pulled back from Cory from a moment to see her face.

"Immmmmm finnnnnneee...." she chattered, and I ignored her. Her face was all but blue, she was so pale, and her body was one big shivering mass, like a puppy left in the rain. She'd tell me she was fine if she were missing a limb.

"What was that? And did you hear that noise?" Nicky asked from behind me. I fought a surge of irritation. He sounded peremptory, like he had a right to her. He was an accident, I thought grudgingly. His tie to her, to her bed, was an accident. He was there by her grace, because she felt bad for him, because she and Green were good enough to bed him in order to save his life. But irritating or not, it was a good question.

"Cory," I said firmly. "What hurt you?"

She shuddered, and I moved hastily, because I thought she might be sick again, although there wasn't anything left in her stomach to throw up.

"It was a smell," she said through a raw throat. "A horrible smell...rotting bodies with black blood, bubbling in a humid sun...festering gangrene, boiling in piss..." She stopped and shivered some more. Wonderful, I thought grimly, looking at Nicky and Mario's pale faces, *now* she uses her poetry.

"It was horrible," Cory continued, her eyes glazed and blank. "It was...it was something...us." She looked up. "It was supernatural...in fact..." Her nose wrinkled, and her hands came up to her to the collar of the sweatshirt she'd snatched from my drawer that morning. Fitfully, fumbling, she pulled the collar down, exposing the left side of her neck. I backed up, blinking in shock.

"It's glowing, isn't it?" she asked, and the three of us nodded our heads. We could see the three layers of Adrian's purple, glowing from her skin.

"It felt like vampire," she said unnecessarily.

"In broad daylight? That's impossible, isn't it?" Mario asked. After the Avians attacked us, one of Green's conditions to their (originally) limited freedom was that they allowed the vampires to feed. That way, the vampires would know what the Avians were thinking, and they could allay any escape attempts. Our Avians were on good terms with the vampires—it was one of the things that made Cory's transition to their leader easier.

"As far as I know," I replied, surprised and shocked. Adrian, my hero, my lover, my brother, was this something you hadn't known?

"He was young," Cory murmured, catching my hand. "He was young, and he was good." She closed her eyes for a moment, yet another clench of revulsion taking over her small body. "This was evil—not ambition or greed or vengeance or jealousy...nothing remotely human...this was real evil." Her eyes opened, found mine, and again, she was reassuring me instead of the other way around. "Adrian wouldn't have recognized this even if it moved at night and shook hands with him."

It looked like she might not throw up again, and she was shivering with cold in her now sodden jeans and sneakers. Abruptly I stood up from my crouch at her side and moved to her feet to pull off her shoes and ruined socks. I looked over my shoulder at Mario and Nicky. Mario got the hint, but Nicky, damn him, looked at me levelly, a determined expression on his pleasant face.

"I'm going to take off her wet clothes," I said, as though to a four year old.

"So," he asserted, as if he had any right to be there. I felt my temper gather like a cloud. Through error and lucky accident he had earned a ticket into Cory's bed, but that didn't give him a right to her body, or to her nudity, or to any part of her that Renny or Mario or La Mark didn't have and by Goddess he would know that before...

"So it's not date night, Nick," Cory said, with humor, behind me. "And we'd like a little space."

"Right. Sorry." And with that and a truly contrite look towards Cory, Nicky flushed, and retreated, leaving me with my gathered temper, and Cory stretching out a placating hand to touch mine.

"Tactfully done, *due'ane*," I grunted, settling down to pulling her jeans off

her hips. The jeans were big on her, otherwise they would have been harder to pull off. They left her legs bare and thin under the weak fluorescent lights.

"Bracken..." she complained, pulling the wet, oversized sweater past her bare hips and bottom. "My underwear?"

Fuck. "Why do you insist on wearing them?" I asked, trying to wrestle the little cotton scrap out of her pants. There was a sound of wet tearing, and the jeans themselves ripped into two pieces, because I forgot that I am stronger than human and frightened for Cory and angry at Nicky and that my own strength is more than sufficient. Fuck.

Cory snorted with suppressed laughter, and pulled her knees up under the wet sweatshirt, huddling in the corner of the couch like she was trying to hide. "Forget them, Bracken," she murmured, covering her laugh with her hand. "They sell sweats at the book store—I'm sure that's where Renny went anyway."

"They don't sell underwear," I said glumly, looking at the shredded, soaking mess in my hand.

"Throw them away, beloved," she murmured, and her voice had grown dark and smoke colored, and I realized I was behaving badly, and she needed something from me that I had not remembered to give. Green would have known immediately, I thought fretfully, then put it out of my mind, because we had established from the beginning that Cory would need me precisely because I was not Green.

"Throw them away," She said again, that note of indulgence still in her voice. "And come sit down next to me." And suddenly, I felt like Green because I could hear all she wasn't saying as she said it. *Forget about your stupid mistake. Bracken Brine Granite op Crocken and come sit here and hold me. I am cold and I am frightened and I need you.*

I did what her heart asked then, and gathered her to me, covering her thighs with my arm and trying to protect her with my shoulders alone.

"You need to do something about Nicky," I heard myself saying, and could have kicked myself because that's not what a woman wants to hear when she's cold and frightened and thinking about a great evil in her world.

"You need to be patient with him," she murmured. "We'll settle in time."

"Tomorrow is 'date night'?" I asked neutrally. Because of their unique situation—and the fact that Cory only loved Nicky as a friend, although she had to be with him every so often as lover or he would molt and pine and die—Cory had figured it would make everybody's life easier if Nicky spent time with Green whenever his schedule allowed and she was in my bed, and so she reserved a special night for her and Nicky. Nicky had been bound to her a little over two months ago, and her second date night was coming up.

"Yeah." She suppressed a sigh, and I suppressed satisfaction that she was not looking forward to it—or so I thought. "Stop gloating," she chastised, "It's all well and good for you, you're a sidhe! Every time you have sex with someone you make the world move. I'm just me, and I'm human, and it's not easy being a disappointment."

I raised my eyebrows, legitimately surprised, and tried to resist purring when her finger crept up into my shortened hair and rubbed along the ridge and point of my ear. "How could you be a disappointment?" I asked carefully—she had been very careful to keep the men in *her* bed out of *our* bed. It was characteristic of her, I thought fondly, to think more of our feelings than we did ourselves.

"He wants Green!" she exclaimed. "Green's his other lover, and, well—you know..." she trailed off. "You've been in Green's bed. Nothing compares to Green."

"It was a long time ago, beloved," I said gently. Nearly fifty years, actually, but I didn't want to remind her of the sixty or so year age difference between us. Although, hard truth was that Green was over eighteen-hundred years old—she could probably handle seventy-five.

"He's practically a god of sweet desire," she snapped. "And I'm just me." Suddenly she blushed. "It was like 'naming of the parts' or something." Her voice took on the occasionally British tones of Green's in a fair mimicry. "This is a woman's breast, Nicky, see the nipple? Rub it more, until it's stiff. That's right. Now feel it in the palm of your hand. See how her eyes close? You're doing very well."

I felt a laugh rumbling in my chest as some of my resentment against Nicky faded away. "It sounds awkward," I said, feeling kind.

"I'm awkward," she grumbled. "I'm clumsy and silly and I laugh at really

bad moments.”

"You laugh?" I was curious now.

"Condoms are the stupidest thing on the planet!" Her hands were busy picking at my sweatshirt. "How am I not supposed to laugh?"

I hadn't thought of that, actually. Vampires were infertile. Adrian, her first lover, would not have had to worry about it. Sidhe were only fertile when they willed it. All Green and I had to do was ask the child waiting to become to wait a little longer. Nicky would need birth control.

"You're breaking your rule," I said after smiling with her gently, wondering why she would suddenly tell me details she'd been quietly happy holding to her chest for over a month.

She looked at me soberly, and her hand moved from my ear to my jaw. "You're getting short with Nicky," she murmured. "The vampires are pissing you off on a regular basis. You came into this relationship expecting to take a back seat to Green, and okay with that, but you're starting to think that I'll have to share blood or sex with the whole entire world and you'll still be in the back seat watching. You need to know that's not true. It's Green, because I love him. It's Nicky, to keep him alive. It's you, because you're my Bracken, my *du'e'alle*, and nobody in my life or my bed is quite like you."

I flushed. If I couldn't tell from feeling the blood rush under my skin, I would have guessed because of her delighted smile.

"Something bad is out there," I said, uncomfortably. "How are we going to keep you safe again?"

She rolled her eyes. "It's not all about me, you know—for all we know, I just felt it in passing. It'll be our job to keep the rest of the world safe."

"So you're like the cosmic preternatural police?" I asked wryly.

She smiled, her in-earnest, make-men-stupid smile, the beauty of it taking my breath away. "Bracken—that was another joke!"

"No way!" Renny said, running into the lounge with her hands full of plastic book store bags. La Mark followed her, and behind him, wonder of wonders, an unexpected friend. "Max was at school and Bracken cracked

another joke—if Cory hadn't just thrown up, I'd say it was an unusual day.”

"You try smelling evil and see what your stomach does," Cory responded with feeling. Then, "Howzis, Officer Max?"

I glared at him. One more person who wanted to get into Cory's pants. Of course, he was currently dating Renny, but I could not forget that he had wanted Cory so badly he'd thought to 'save' her from all of us—from Green, from Adrian, from me.

"Don't worry about the joke, Renny," Max said dryly. "He still hates my guts, all is right with the world.”

"You realize that I kicked Mario and Nicky out so the whole world wouldn't be in here while she was undressed, right?" I asked pleasantly. La Mark almost skidded to a halt he was in such a hurry to turn around, and Max had the grace to flush.

"Sorry Cory," he murmured. "I thought I'd walk Renny in.”

"All good, Max," Cory responded amiably. "But if everybody will let me and Renny change, we can let the guys back to do the same thing.”

And that got rid of Max. Renny of course stayed. She shifted skin so much that being nude in front of me didn't trouble her—and judging from the number of times we had seen Max trotting down the back stairs from the main floor to the garage, I would imagine that he had left for Cory's benefit alone.

"So," Renny asked, shucking her own wet jeans past her hips, "What was it?"

Bare bottomed she rummaged through the plastic bags and pulled out a pair of sweats that she threw at Cory and I, followed by a dry sweatshirt and a T-shirt. Then she shucked off her wet sweatshirt and dropped it in a pile at her feet with her bottoms, standing naked without shame in the middle of the lounge as she rooted through the bags. I looked at her, without really seeing, trying to put Cory's report into words that wouldn't make Renny throw up, and was distracted by Cory's snort of laughter.

"What?" I asked, and she simply giggled some more.

"If you don't know, I can't explain it," she managed, and she and Renny

exchanged looks that I couldn't interpret; then Renny started laughing as well. When they were done laughing at my expense, Cory explained the phenomenon—the evil, seeking presence that had assaulted her mind—as the two of them toweled off (using a new green and gold C.S.U.S. towel) and dressed hurriedly in sweats and shirts the same color. Whereas Renny's body had seemed as natural without clothes as a kitten's body would seem, I couldn't help but to look at Cory, thin as she was, her skin translucent and pink with cold. Elves were not supposed to feel possessive—high sidhe, as I was, especially so. But she was naked in this miserable, dim little room with me, and I was proud of that.

Renny saw me gazing at her, and burst out laughing all over again, and suddenly I wished for the home of Green's hill, nearly an hour away. Abruptly I stood up and went to stalk out of the room, when Cory stopped me with a small, cold hand on my arm.

"You should change too," she murmured, and looked at Renny. "You got sweats for him?"

"They'll go to his knees, but yes."

"I don't mind the cold," I muttered, uncomfortable in that room where I hadn't been before.

"Change, beloved," Cory commanded, and when she used that tone of voice, and called me beloved, I had no choice, no choice at all.

Eventually we were all warmer and in dry clothes and since Renny had the presence of mind to buy velum rain ponchos (these too in the ubiquitous and obnoxious green and yellow) we made it out to the car much drier than we had made it to the campus. Our party split up then—Max was there, and off duty, and he and the others decided to go to a movie. I hated movie theatres (although I loved watching videos on Green's large television) and was more than happy to bundle Cory into the Suburban and take her home.

She sat sideways on the front seat, leaning her head against the rest and watching me with quiet eyes until I stopped swearing and hit I-80. It was midday, so in spite of the rain, the traffic was still not bad. Her silence had a building quality, and I could imagine her, sorting through the words in her head to say the easiest, the most colloquial things to me, afraid that I would laugh if it sounded too much like the poetry it was.

"You didn't grow up human," she murmured, "But you've met with enough town kids to know what I'm talking about here. You've got rich kids in our area, with the big houses in the new developments, and everybody expects them to go to college, right?"

I nodded. I didn't meet these people, but the young people I knew talked about them. They didn't come back and play with their old friends very often.

"And you've got the aggies, the kids whose parents inherited, or bought early when it was cheap, and they grew up on big stretches of land and had to work on it with Mom and Dad, and everybody expects these kids to be waitresses or clerks in the mall or truck drivers or auto mechanics or shit like that. And a hundred years ago, that would have been perfect, because they would have been farmers, and farmers are necessary, but now they have nowhere to go." Her voice grew thick then, and every nerve in my body pitched, because this *hurt* her, and I realized with unhappiness that she probably felt more naked, telling me this while bundled under a stadium blanket and piles of new clothing, than she had felt in that miserable little room when she'd been bare to her pink, goose-pimpled skin.

"And which one were you?" I asked, dreading the answer.

"Well," she said slowly, "I was like the platypus of my high school—wasn't a bird, wasn't a weasel, wasn't even a fish."

I felt a smile creeping up, in spite of her pain. Interpreting one's own heart into words had its uses. "What was left?"

"Me," she said simply. "When I was a freshman, I did have friends—but no one expected any of *us* to go to college. By the end of the year, a third had dropped out to have babies and a third had been expelled for drug use and everybody who was left found nothing better to do than give me shit for keeping my grades up."

"Screw 'em," I said roughly. Fucking humans.

"Exactly," she seconded. A silence. "But it's not easy being all alone. I liked choir but..." But her parents hadn't approved. She had a voice that would make a grown human weep, and her parents hadn't told her to sing. Unbelievable. She cleared her throat. "Anyway, so there I was. It was like the only way I could deal with alone was to hate the world...I was good at it."

"No," I denied.

"Let's just say humans didn't notice."

"Fucking humans," I grunted.

"Sometimes, in the privacy of their own homes," she quipped. It was our favorite play on words.

"So...the black hair dye and the eyebrow ring..."

"And the nose ring and the two tons of black mascara and the perpetual pissed off expression...yadda yadda yadda...there I was, right when Arturo walked into the Chevron and touched my hand, right when I looked up and saw Adrian."

"You changed..." I said, the obvious.

A laugh. "Nooooo, you think?" I could almost hear her eyes roll. "And suddenly I wasn't alone anymore. Last semester, Renny was there, and she was my friend...a flaky one who sometimes had to be bailed out of Golden Gate Park naked, but she was my friend nonetheless. And Nicky, who was my friend too—and I had Green to go home to on the weekends, and I thought 'Wow! I have people now.'"

"You've got a lot more this semester," I added needlessly.

"And that's why I'm telling you all this..." her voice grew thick again, aching, sweet. "Thank you, Bracken. That's what I'm getting to. Just thanks."

"Green ordered me to," I said, embarrassed that I had complained about it.

"You didn't bitch nearly as loud as you could have," she murmured. There was silence in the car then, and her body, wearied by being sick for so long, and so violently, pulled her into sleep.

We continued up the hill to Auburn, then took a big right off the freeway to Foresthill. I was glad she was sleeping, because although not squirrely with curves, the Foresthill road had enough big, swinging curves to make her queasy, and her stomach was already tetchy enough. It was winter and snow had come and receded and would probably come again. We just lived at the line where snow did that—sometimes we were waist deep in it when we left Green's hill, sometimes we spent the whole winter in frigid mud. Right now it was frigid mud

with greenish, over-watered grasses sprinkling the soil. They peeked from around the raw granite that was the face of the canyon after the road had been ripped out of the hills.

We kept going, past the span of the double bridge—the one that kept showing up in all the movies, past lake Clementine, some more curves, and then past Scary Tree (Cory's name for it) which was looking a little darker now than it had this summer. I wondered at that—Green said it was some sort of preternatural barometer once. I didn't remember if the darkness was a good thing or a bad thing for our hill—it had been a passing conversation. Some more curves, and then we were at that curious part of the road that even those who dwelled in Green's hill forgot, and then a hidden left into a road cut into the canyon, and we were home.

We were both scheduled to work at Grace's store that evening. I would have called in sick but Cory would have objected. Besides, I didn't want to leave Grace shorthanded. I wanted to let her sleep until it was time to leave, but when I carried Cory into her bedroom, she woke up. It was our bedroom now, actually. My parents had moved all of my clothes and personals into it after the binding ceremony—nobody told them that the ceremony itself had not been consensual, so this had been a joyous thing for them. Now, Cory slept in Green's bed, when she was with Green, and in Nicky's bed, on date night, and in her bed, with me, the other two thirds of her nights. There had been good reasons why Green and I had supposed she'd need another lover.

This afternoon, she woke up and smiled at me from the bed, her eyes sleepy, and soft and needy in a womanly way that made my blood run hot, even on this soggy day.

I started to pull away, virtuously, because she was tired and I didn't want to hurt her.

"Please, Bracken, please?" She said throatily, sitting up just enough in bed to pull my sweats down my thighs, laughing when my cock fell forward heavily, already engorged. She licked me then, tantalizingly, and then, when I groaned, she popped the head of me into her mouth. As she knelt there on the bed, in a position that most women thought of as subservient, her eyes met mine over my erection, and up the length of my torso. Her eyes were hazel green, and in the gray afternoon light they were bright with passion, and crinkled with humor, and a little humming sound issued from her throat and it tickled my head, and my ass

clenched and my hips thrust forward. She grunted, and laughed and I could feel her laugh stroking me, and I came just a little, just enough to make her throat work, once, and I knew that my beloved, in this position, loving me, pulling my seed from me, making me crazy to throw her against the bed and to plunge into her hot and slick and wet and clenching around me like a slippery fist, was more powerful on her knees with me than I had ever been on my feet alone.

CORY

Dysfunction

Making love to Bracken was a cross between cliff diving and being invaded by a returning prince who had been exiled from his home country.

The initial free fall between *I'm going to touch this beautiful inhuman* and *Oh my God, he's going to touch me* never failed to leave me breathless, suspended in air, even while I was writhing under his long fingered, wide palmed touch. It was a mighty wind caressing my skin, the tingle of salt air between my thighs as he spread them, being tumbled in a fantastic sensual surf where every nerve was alive when he licked and tasted and touched. And when I was screaming, unable to breathe, begging to surface in climax, he invaded.

He was gentle, because he loved this country, but he was still aggressive, and, well, over-armed. He thrust into me with an intensity and concentration that forced me to hold fast to myself, or I would become Bracken's second skin, a thing I dared not let happen when Green was not in the hill to control the forces that sex wrung out of my quivering body. But always, always, there was an urgency, a suppressed violence in him and I was never more aware of how delicate and fragile I was as a mortal and human than when Bracken, with his immortal sidhe strength was trying his very best not to fuck me to a pulp. When my orgasm washed over me, the magic that strong emotion brought out tingled along my nerve endings, and although I'd learned how to control this magic with Green, whose sex grew it planet sized and leviathan strong, it was never more out of control than it was when Bracken. At this instant, maybe because today had been special, because I'd confided in Bracken as I had not confided in Green, because Green had acknowledged that Bracken was his second, as far as I was concerned, or because here, with his cock stretching me to the point I could feel it distending the lower part of my stomach and he was more at home in my body in Green's hill than he was in his own skin in the big bad human world, but I

couldn't find a total grip on my magic. As it filled my skin I bit his shoulder, flexing my hands, trying to grip the power, but instead it spilled over, a little, onto the walls and the ceiling around us. It was a long, slow come, because I'd tried to control my body, to hold onto my pleasure, and by the time the shivers in my clenching center had faded I was keening, low and insistently, in my throat, trying to control the touch, the blood, and the song that had overcome me when being invaded by my beloved conqueror.

His heart was thundering in my ears, and I'm sure the other way around. We lay, body to body, his face so close to mine that I could see the haunting lack of freckles or flaws on his sidhe-pale skin, and his shaggy hair sticking to his hairline in clumps. Most of his weight was resting on his forearms, and a laugh that was purely masculine hit my face with a blast of air and a little sprinkling of sweat. Bracken could run a mile with me in his arms and not break a sweat, but face to face, body in body, loving me with everything inside him—that made him damp and breathless. Apparently it made something magic happen inside me too.

"You slipped," he murmured. In the rainy light his sidhe-high cheekbones cast shadows against his cheeks, and his grim mouth crinkled at the corners.

"Technically, I think you slipped through me," I said back. I dreaded to look around me and see what changes I had wrought on the clean pine boards that made up my room.

Bracken raised his head then, and because he was still inside me, I could feel his breath shuddering out of his body as he looked around.

"Beloved Goddess, Holy God," he said softly, "You don't ever do things in halves, do you?"

"I'm afraid to look," I said, covering my eyes, but Bracken slid wetly out of me and rolled over to his side. He pulled my hands from my eyes then, and forced me to look around.

Wow. It was a mural—sort of. The waxed boards weren't painted...they were...stained...saturated with rich colors, colors that bled into one another without a space between. On one side of the room was the shade of oak trees and granite, surrounding a green/brown pond the exact color of Bracken's eyes and on the other side of the room was a meadow of multi-hued greens. Adrian's moon was over the shaded pond in a purple sky and the sun was over the

meadow in an azure the exact color of my power. Everybody I'd ever loved was represented in the impressionistic, darkly textured stained walls of my room, and I was the orange and the gold in the blue that gave them light.

"You think Green will like?" I asked worriedly, and bit my lip because I had mentioned Green. But it's funny what Bracken will take offense to and what he won't.

"Why should he?" My stone and shadow lover asked. "It's...." He waved his hand, at a loss for words. "I like it," he said simply.

I shrugged, tugging the crumpled blanket around me because all I was wearing was a T-shirt and now I really was tired and I didn't feel like hunting for my sweats. "I was going to tack a poster up once and he almost had a coronary," I said uncomfortably. It was embarrassing to admit how crass I'd been when I'd arrived on Green's doorstep.

"This is much better than a thumbtack," Bracken said decisively, and then with a deft slip he pulled my T-shirt over my head and down my arms, then burrowed under the blankets with me, spooning me from behind so that my short, slender legs tangled with his long, thickly muscled calves and thighs.

"We are a pretty picture," I murmured, not just talking about Bracken and I, but too sleepy to say it all. "You're not tired," I finished with an effort, because he had settled me in with my head on top of his arm and I knew that meant he wasn't getting up without me.

"I'll just lay here and listen to you breathe," he whispered, and I think he was totally sincere and I didn't know how to take that sort of breathless, intense devotion because I still couldn't believe any of them loved me.

"Stalker," I said, because my sense of humor is the last thing that falls asleep in my brain. It laughed with him, as I drifted off to nap.

Bracken woke me up two hours later and hustled me into the shower so we could leave with Grace. The sun wasn't down yet, and I had just enough time to marvel that my once unremarkable white-tiled bathroom was now the same sort of mottled mural as my pine-board room—more pond and granite shadow colors, less green, I guess because Green never used my bathroom now that Bracken and I were bound together. Then I was out of the shower and into a new pair of jeans (courtesy of the sprites and the personal shopper Green had

assigned me) and a T-shirt that had once been white and now looked exactly like my room.

"Did I do this?" I asked, looking at what was rapidly becoming my favorite piece of clothing, *ever*.

"I think the sprites, once they saw the room." Bracken nodded approvingly, but completely casual because, I guess, he'd seen miracles like this since he'd been born.

"How do I thank them for things like this?" I asked, still overwhelmed by the thousands of flower seeds they'd planted for me after Christmas. About half of them were purple pansies, for Adrian, and the other half wild mustard flowers, for Green.

"You leave pizza in your room every Friday," Bracken murmured, "I think you do enough."

"Especially since you haven't eaten pizza since you came back from San Francisco," Grace said dryly, poking her head in my door and, after seeing that we were both dressed, coming all the way in. Grace is a tall, lanky, wide-hipped curly red-headed vampire, but shoving a roast beef sandwich in my hands and a vegetarian one into Bracken's, she was one-hundred percent den mother. I appreciated her more than I think words could say.

"Nice work!" She looked animatedly around the room. "I'll have to come in and see if I can make a quilt like this or something."

I nodded, sinking my teeth into the sandwich blissfully. There was some sort of chipotle mustard sauce on the inside that was to die for.

"Thanks—it was sort of an accident," I told her, blushing. "This is wonderful, thank you," I added with a swallow. "Grace, how do you know how to make stuff taste so good if you can't eat human food anymore?" I asked, pulling the homemade bread off my teeth with my tongue.

Grace grinned, her fangs protruding from her otherwise ordinary, plump, freckled, house-wife's face. "I can't eat, honey, but there's nothing in the books that says I can't taste."

I grinned back and after some rummaging around the messy bed, grabbed my purse and my slicker, and was on my way out the door when Grace said

"Bring your knitting." So I grabbed that too.

Green's hill is in the vagueness between Foresthill, Colfax, and Auburn, and Grace's shop was right in the middle of Old Auburn, sitting next to the surprising, three story mall-like building that was what tourist traps should look like, with wood and glass and twinkling lights. The store itself only stayed open 'til nine, which meant that in March, Bracken and I would have to come out alone and take over on the days we worked it. (Technically speaking, we don't actually *have* to work for Grace, because Green would rather I didn't work at all while I was going to school, but since the reason he sent us to school in the first place was so we could help his organization when we graduated, I figured that helping two nights a week while we went wouldn't kill us.)

Tonight as we headed down the gently curving and occasionally icy highway 49, I reviewed everything Grace had gone over last time we'd worked which was mostly the standard retail crap—inventory, registers, suppliers, unloading the truck, over-time, that sort of thing. It was like the Chevron I'd worked at for two years, only classier, happier, and we got to play the music of our choice as loud as we wanted—Grace called it ambience, and I could live with that.

I enjoyed the discussion, and tried to ignore how totally lost Bracken looked. Poor Bracken—he'd spent his formative years as an indulged only child, and so far, the only thing that had been expected from him had been muscle. He hated the human world so badly, I wondered how he could love me at all.

When we had turned on Lincoln Way and gone out of sight of the freeway, I remembered to ask Grace why she wanted me to bring my knitting.

"It's an ice breaker," she said happily. She liked driving and she liked conversation. "It gives you something to talk about with the customers—you seemed a little stiff last time you worked."

I blinked. And again. And Bracken started to completely crack up.

"You want me to...talk? Like to the customers?" I sounded stupid and I knew it, but...

"Is that a problem?" Grace asked, amused.

"I just..." Suddenly I felt my palms start to sweat for no good reason. "I worked graveyards at the Chevron because I'm not good with people," I said

after a moment of trying to put my panic into words.

Grace spared a glance from the road to frown at me in the passenger seat. "You're fine with people."

"I'm fine with *our* people," I said, trying very hard not to make a big deal out of it. "Human beings, not so much." I shrugged, ignoring the shakiness of my breath. "It'll be fine," I finished brightly. But if Grace was satisfied with that, Bracken wasn't.

"That night I saw you in the Chevron..."

The night that resulted in vampire guts all over the walls, one of the larger, nastier scars on my body, and Adrian shoved in a car trunk to stave off the encroaching dawn? Oh yeah, that night. "I remember it," I said dryly.

"So do I," Bracken replied grimly. He'd almost killed me that night, just by being who he was, because I was bleeding, and his power pulls blood out of people's bodies. It was a bad night. "And I remember you smiled so sweetly at an old man that he wandered out of the store wondering what his own name was."

"And ended up headless and dead," I finished up for him grimly. Did I mention it was a bad night?

"But you talked to him!" he insisted. "You were pleasant. You can talk to people—all you have to do is let them see you. You let him see you—you know, not the bitch you were trying to be back then, but you, like you are now, with your nice red hair, and not that black crap, and your pretty eyes, your sweet fa...What?" he demanded suddenly, because Grace had pulled up to a stop sign and not gone when it was her turn and we were both staring at him over our shoulders as though he'd grown another head. My eyes burned fiercely and it was hard to swallow.

"What?" he demanded again from his place in the back. Grace and I looked at each other helplessly, and Grace shrugged.

"He has no idea what that does to you, does he?" she asked softly.

"Fucking preternatural males," I forced through a tight throat. "None of them do."

A car beeped behind us and Grace pulled forward, leaving me speechless

in the front seat and Bracken baffled in the back.

So tonight I counted inventory and, while Bracken unloaded the delivery of yarn, fabric, and pattern books from the truck, I waited on people. Grace was right, the knitting made it easier.

"So what are you working on?" A grandmotherly sort of woman asked me as I pulled the sumptuous, acrylic/wool boucle through my fingers and clicked my needles in a way that never failed to completely chill me out.

"A sweater," I murmured, stroking the almost completed front with my hands.

"For who, Goliath?" she asked, and I had to smile at her.

"For my...husband," I said, glancing up. My hands, though, schooled by practice and that wonderful Zen concentration that knitting induces, kept moving, knit four, purl one, knit four, purl one, reverse on the next row...

"Well," She smiled at me conspiratorially, without even sparing a glance for my empty ring finger, "It's a good thing you're already married, because you know the myth of the boyfriend sweater, don't you?" Her brown eyes twinkled up at me from behind wrinkles and thick glasses. She was a gnomish looking person, with curly grey/brown hair and a peach colored leisure suit, but she was, as far as I could tell, human.

"I've never heard it," I said, curious. I looked up at Bracken, bound to me as more than a boyfriend, and more even than a husband. He was hanging the quilts Grace had brought from home out on the quilt racks that loomed in display at the upper levels of the store. He was tall enough to reach without a ladder, and his sweatshirt pulled up past his lean abdomen, and I wondered if he'd included cover for his two extra ribs in his glamour. Probably not, I thought warmly, as he stretched and flexed with unconscious grace. I hadn't told him who the sweater was for, when I was picking out the yarn and forcing him to touch it and judiciously measuring the colors with my eyes. But he had seen the mural my magic made this afternoon, and the brackish, smoky violet should look very familiar.

"Well you know," the woman was saying, eying my beloved with appreciation of her own, "They say that if you make a sweater for a man you're not married to, in the time it takes you to make the sweater, you'll break up."

"No!" I'd never heard that.

"Oh yes, it's true!" she added enthusiastically, "Of course, I told my husband that if he broke up with me, he'd have to give me the sweater as a parting gift."

"I take it you didn't break up."

"Well, he didn't like the sweater, but since he returned it with an engagement ring, I decided to forgive him!"

I laughed, terribly enchanted, and she laughed with me.

"But I must say," She said thoughtfully after a moment, "I don't know if it would be true if all sweaters were made with that stuff you're working with now! That's nice!"

I grinned at her and felt my work with restless hands. The fabric was so real under my fingers. I was surrounded with elves and magic and vampires, and this sweater was the only thing in my life I could talk about. "It's great, isn't it?" I affirmed. "Would you like to see it? Brack just unloaded a new shipment—we've got it in, like eight different colors!"

And there I was, talking with a human being. I had something in common with my native species after all.

The rest of the night went well—it was actually sort of fun. I'd been talking to Grace since before Christmas about crafts, about knitting, crocheting, cross-stitching, and quilting. It was a chance to show off, to be helpful, to share knowledge. I wondered if working in the Chevron would have been quite so stifling if I had actually talked to people, or if it was sharing the same interests that made the people in *A Yarning for Crafts* bearable. It didn't matter, I decided, as I sat at the register and bound off the front of Brack's sweater. I was happy here, now, and that was a good thing.

Grace came out from the back—it was the end of the month and she was balancing books—and told me to go with Bracken and get dinner before the Mongolian B.B.Q around the corner closed.

"Wasn't the sandwich dinner?" I was still full.

"The sandwich was lunch," she said firmly. "You've been sharing blood

with the kiss, and you need to, but you haven't gained back a pound since you were sick, and you need to keep eating."

"I've gained five!" I protested, but she took my knitting firmly from my hands and placed it carefully in my quilted bag (her gift to me, this Christmas), and before I could protest again, Bracken was right behind her to take me in hand.

"You have not," he said firmly, holding my slicker up with an air of nonsense.

"How would you know? I don't think there's a single scale at home!"

"Then how would you know you have?" he returned, but our bickering was good natured, and the two of them had succeeded in their aims, because my coat was on and Bracken and I were headed for the door. It was nearing eight o'clock, and we almost ran into the woman and her two children coming inside. I took a step back and grinned at the kids—both boys—and their wide-eyed appreciation of Bracken, looming behind me from his impossible height.

I looked up to their mom and blinked. "Gra..." I started to say, then looked behind me to the real Grace, but strangely enough she was nowhere to be seen. I would have thought she'd be up front, since the store was open for another slow hour. "I'm sorry," I mumbled, flushing, "You look like a friend of mine." I stood back and waited for the woman to follow her boys in, but she looked at me, troubled, and almost frightened. She was in her thirties, like Grace had been when she'd died, and her brown-red curly hair was cut a little shorter than Grace's, and framed a narrower, more piquant face—with freckles the exact same color, and a wide, generous mouth—the same shape, and limpid brown eyes—the same shade. She was shorter too, I thought, slighter, without the wide-hipped, lanky swagger, but these differences were small, and superficial, and the resemblance had frightening implications.

"Grace was my mother's name," she said, almost defiantly. "How did you know?"

Oh Jesus. All of the air left my body, and for a moment I didn't think I would ever breathe again. No wonder Grace had fled to the back room.

"I didn't," I said carefully. The elves couldn't lie—not physically, it made them sick—and I'd made it sort of a point of honor with myself to follow their

rules. I had magic from the Goddess—I never knew when her restrictions on lying were going to kick in for me, and I didn't want to find out the hard way. "I didn't know your mother's name was Grace," I murmured again. My hands were cold, and my face was cold too, and I wondered if I was as pale as I felt. "Uhm...can I help you? My...the...our night clerk seems to have run back for something."

Grace's daughter nodded, her eyes wide and luminous and never leaving mine. She pointed to a quilt—one of the ones that Bracken had just hung up on display.

"I need to know who made that," she asked, and if she hadn't looked like she was holding on tight to her tears, I would have said she was rude, but we both knew better. I looked at the quilt, my heart sinking.

"The owner of the store. Why?" But I knew.

"My mother...died," she said, her voice choked. Her boys were off, looking at the hand-carved wooden toys the gnomes so enjoyed making, but I took a glance at them anyway. They were probably six and eight, or thereabouts, smaller, freckled, sturdy and very male, for small boys. The older one had narrow, sensitive hands, and rubbed the carved work with a tilt to his head and an innate sensitivity, and the younger one watched him carefully, as though taking notes.

"She died of cancer when I was fifteen." Their mother continued through a tight throat, and I pulled my attention reluctantly back. I couldn't afford to escape into the world of small boys right now. "The summer she died, she made me a quilt with that exact motif—it's rare. It's really rare. The colors were different—they were..." She frowned, "Sunnier. More yellows, more greens, not so much purple and black, and that murky oak leave color..." She looked at me again, that defiance in her eyes. *Lie to me*, she seemed to say. *Lie to me. I'll see it. I'll know the truth.* Goddess, I hoped so, I thought wretchedly. I hoped she had an inkling, because if this fell out the way I thought it was going to, the truth was going to floor her. Panic started trickling along my nerve endings, and I tried to control it, because I'd been sharing blood with half the kiss and we were tuning in to each other's brain chatter lately. I didn't want to freak them out, and Green always knew when I was losing it, and I didn't want him to hop the next flight home for essentially what boiled down to a family drama, but I couldn't help it. I was just beginning to learn how to act around human beings but my new-found

people skills were nowhere near this good.

"That's my mother's work," she said, belligerently, "And I want to know who stole it."

"No one stole it," I said, calmly, wondering if my eyes were swallowing my face yet. "I can swear before any god you believe in that no one stole that work."

"But it's my *mother's*," She insisted. "My best friend came in here during Christmas and bought a quilt like that one, and I saw it. I saw it up close. My mom had this knot, when she finished off—she machine quilted, but she would hand-sew the label, and the knot—it was intricate and special, and she showed it to me and my sister and made us learn it. She said she got it from her grandmother and that knot was on my quilt and it was on my friend's quilt and I'd give money that it's on that quilt and I want to know *who stole my mother's work*."

There was a ringing silence in the store, and Bracken's hand came up to my shoulder in what I assumed was question. I was their leader, their queen, and I'd been known to kick some serious ass, but I did not know, could not know, how to deal with this hysterical woman, Grace's daughter, who was angry because I knew her mother and she did not.

"No one stole it," I repeated, uncertainly. "It's...the owner of the store made it. I...she's made one for me..." I trailed off weakly, because she had, and I wondered if that quilt, the one she made for me when I was recovering from my illness this winter, meant the same things to me that it did to this terrified, angry, grief-stricken woman. There was a fraught silence in the store then, and I prayed for someone to walk in from the street, or from the back door to the mall, or even to drop in from the sky, and no one did. In the back of my mind I heard the flutter of one mind, then two, tuning in to my uncertainty, but I was so mesmerized by the tragedy I saw here that I couldn't think to respond.

"Listen to me, you bitch," She hissed, moving up to my face in a way that would have been threatening if I wasn't sure that I could take her. "You're lying to me, you're hiding something, I've never seen anyone look so scared now ***tell me what you know about my mother.***"

"She's right here, Chloe," Grace said, stepping out from behind the shelf to my left. She moved with vampiric silence and terrifying stealth and my heart

almost popped out of my chest. Even Chloe gave a little shriek. "The work is mine."

Chloe's face got even more pale, if that was possible, and her freckles stood out greenly. She took a couple of shuddering breaths, and I expected a scream, or a moan, or anger, but she was Grace's daughter, and she didn't have hysterics, she spoke from the heart instead.

"You *left!*" Chloe gasped. "You were *dead*. We got your letter—Daddy found the body...you were *dead!* How could you lie to us like that!"

"I didn't lie," Grace said evenly, and she blinked, hard. She didn't want to weep blood in front of her daughter, I could tell. With movement so sudden Chloe couldn't resist, Grace seized her hand and held it up to her neck. "Feel that, my darling? No pulse. No pulse, no breath, no sunlight, no redemption. I was dying. I wanted to at least see you grow up. This is the trade I made."

Chloe's breath came in short pants, and little whimpering sounds came out of her throat, and I saw what was going to happen before Grace did, because I'd been there a couple of times myself. Grace, eyes shut tight against the tears, opened her mouth, her fangs extending in an obviously impossible, unmistakable way. Chloe's brown eyes, so like her mothers, rolled back in her head and she crumpled to the ground, followed by Grace who gathered her daughter up into her mother's arms and sobbed like a child.

My mental scream of panic traveled as far as Newcastle and Colfax before I could calm it down, and by then it was too late—thirty vampires were flying like, well, vampires out of bumfuck Egypt to save me from the bad guys, and I was too stunned to reach out and stop them.

"Oh Jesus—Bracken..." I squeaked, and Bracken, whose human skills were so obviously confined to me alone, looked equally blank.

Before I panic and run screaming home, beloved, could you take a breath and tell me what's going on? Green murmured calmly in my head, and I almost sank to the floor myself in sheer fucking relief.

I don't know how much sense I made, in pictures, words and panic, but Green started issuing calm orders in my head, and my heart rate slowed and I started listening to him.

First off, call the vampires and tell them to calm down. Green said slowly

in my mind, *They're going to panic people.*

I tried then in my head, but Grace was making a low keening sound, and the two boys saw their mother in trouble and were heading towards us and I couldn't pull my brain together enough to feel them in my head.

Okay...Green said in my brain with what sounded like forced patience. There was a familiar, panting, strained overtone to his Voice'. Okay, then, first thing, my beloved, is to move Grace and her daughter to the back room, and have Bracken supervise the children.

"Bracken?" I asked out loud, but Green's affirmative noise was short and pointed and my own panic was subsiding enough to wonder exactly what he had been doing when I'd freaked out.

"What?" Bracken answered, and I nodded my head towards the two small boys.

"Watch them," I hissed, and following Green's instructions blindly I bent towards Grace. "Grace, sweetie..." I bent down and touched her shoulder. "Grace—we've got to get to the back room, okay? You understand?" Grace nodded, to my immense relief, and cradling her full grown daughter in her arms like a small child, she stood and started moving to the back office.

I turned to check on Bracken in time to hear him say, "Here, little men—have you seen how this top can spin without string?" And moved towards him while I could.

"Bracken..." I whispered, partly embarrassed, partly urgent, "In about five minutes, a whole lot of vampires are going to get here...could you sort of calm them down?"

The look he gave me was priceless, but I gave him one of my own, embarrassed, panic stricken, exasperated: "Well, would you rather go back and deal with Grace instead?"

"Grace?" Said one of the boys at our feet—the youngest one, who's carrot-orange hair had obviously been cut by himself in recent history and who had apparently had a close encounter with a permanent marker around the same time. "Grace is our grandmother's name."

Bracken shook his head in panic, and turned to the boy, saying, "And it's a

pretty name, isn't it? Would you like to know my favorite name?"

As I disappeared, I heard one of the boys say, "Cory—that's my best friend's stinky brother's name...why would Cory be your favorite name?"

Inside the office, Grace was at least sitting in a chair, but Chloe's eyes were closed, and she was breathing rhythmically against Grace's chest.

"Grace..." I murmured, unwilling to interrupt with my complete incompetence. "Grace, Green says I have to tell the vampires that we're going to be okay...I called them and..."

Grace looked at me, startled out of herself for the first time since she'd seen Chloe walk into the store and had run into the stock room. "Why did you call the vampires?" she asked, puzzled. "Why would Green be in your head telling you not to call the vampires?"

"Oh, I don't know, Grace—maybe because I panicked?" I winced at the sarcasm in my voice, but Grace knew me and loved me anyway.

"Cory—you took down a giant bird in a public place at night with a .45 you could barely hold you were so weak and didn't crack a sweat...why would you panic?" she asked, looking bemused. Unconsciously her hand was stroking her daughter's hair.

"Because you were crying," I said through a stiff jaw.

"You've seen me cry before," she replied gently. She'd told me about her family then, to let me see how important it was that I took Bracken's intentions towards me seriously, even though I would always love Green.

"You...you were all *you*, then." Oh yeah, that made sense. "And this time you weren't...you were falling apart...and I wanted to help you and I didn't know how." I shrugged, trying not to make this moment about my own shortcomings. "Nevermind." I heard the front bell ring, and then again and again, urgently. "I'll go tell Phillip and everybody not to lose their minds, okay?"

Grace suddenly smiled at me, a weary, sad smile, but a smile nonetheless, and reached out her hand. I took it in my own and squeezed. "Next time, Cory, sweetheart, a hug might do better than thirty freaked out vampires, okay?" I nodded my head, and took her cue to lean over her shoulders and hug her awkwardly.

"I love you, Grace," I said, meaning it. "We all love you. Anything we can do...even if it's just making sure the kids don't remember...or that they do...you let me know, okay?"

"Love you too, sweetie," she said softly, and I pulled away, leaving her looking at her grown daughter's face with wonder and grief.

My face was hot with embarrassment by the time I hit the front of the store, and I was babbling apologies the whole way.

"I'm so sorry, Phillip!" I said as the tall, immaculately groomed, sharp-faced ex-stockbroker eyed me with grim amusement. "Marcus—I didn't mean to freak you all out!" Marcus used to be a school teacher, before Phillip found him in an avalanche and brought him over with Adrian's help. He was comfortably handsome and a little shy one on one—if you asked him about anything having to do with history or politics he'd talk passionately and brilliantly, but otherwise he liked to think his opinion didn't matter. Of the two men, Phillip made the more ruthless leader and Marcus made the more circumspect decision maker, which is why they'd been Adrian's seconds in the vampire world. I relied on them in the same way and they...they revered me, in a way that was terrifying and uncomfortable. They seemed to think that I could take care of them, love them in that totally protective way in which Adrian had led, and I was so frightened of failure that sometimes I couldn't breathe when we were in the room. To stumble in on them (and Chester and Bryn and Ellis and...*dear Goddess* how many other vampires were coming in?) babbling of apology could have been one of the most mortifying moments of my life.

If they had let it be.

"Is Grace okay?" Marcus asked immediately. "Bracken told us what happened—is she going to be all right?"

I swallowed and blinked. Of course. These were Adrian's vampires. Grace had led them while I'd been gone. They too had left families and loved ones to be night hunters, to be the dead. Of any one, the vampires streaming one after another in various states of dress (and soggiess—it was still raining out there!) would understand how traumatic this would be for Grace. They would—they *were*—all forgiving me for my panic call, because it would have been their panic call as well.

"I don't know," I murmured honestly. "I'm so lost with this. I think we need

to let Grace decide how to proceed." The other vampires—looking around now crowded little store I saw at least twenty of them—all nodded in understanding, and I took a deep breath of relief—Grace would deal with it, I could deal with it, human problems could be dealt with.

At that exact moment the doors to the outside crashed open so quickly one of the glass panes in the bottom cracked and the hinges squealed in pain as they ripped sideways. Arturo, Grace's sidhe lover, hurtled into the room with so much force from prolonged hyperspeed that I was blown backwards into the cashier's stand. My head cracked against the wood, pain exploded behind my eyes and I saw stars. Bracken was there in half-a-heartbeat, but I had put my hand back behind my head and it came away with blood on it, so I was not going to get any cuddling from him immediately. I dragged my battered, sore, skinny ass up just as Bracken got in the face of the biggest, baddest, most physically imposing elf at our hill.

"What the fuck, Arturo! You could have killed someone!"

Arturo's eyes were whirling, his chest heaving with the effort—he must have run fifteen miles in five minutes, no mean feat, even if you were working on the will of the Goddess alone. "Grace," he snarled. "Where the hell is Grace?"

Of course. Every vampire in the kiss at the hill goes flying out screaming "Grace", Arturo's going to be listening to the psychic all-call, right?

Dearest, are you all right? Green said in my head, and I gave the equivalent of a mental grunt.

Panicked Arturo. I murmured. Pissed off Bracken. Bonk to the noggin. All systems fucked up as usual.

I heard the equivalent of a mental chuckle, but he must not have been that amused because he kept lurking in my head, probing my wound. *You're bleeding!*

Hence, the reason Bracken is across the room about ready to deck Arturo...I think I need to move now.

"Grace is fine," I articulated, trying hard to see the two combatants past the darkness in my vision. "Grace is fine. Where are the boys?"

"They're in the playroom, with half our inventory," Brack said smartly.

Good—there was a reason we'd established a little play room for munchkins. Little kids and craft stores sooo did not mix well. I put my hands underneath me and pushed up, then grabbed the top of the stand and hauled myself up by main force. I could stand, with wobbly knees, and blurred vision, but I could stand.

"Her daughter came into the store—she panicked, I panicked—I'm sorry, Arturo," I said, still wobbling. "I truly didn't mean to send us all into a tailsp..." Oh, this was bad. I swayed on my feet and tried not to barf and it wasn't the head wound that was making me queasy.

Suddenly, every vampire in the room went down. Five of them—the five I didn't know that well and hadn't taken blood from simply went over backwards, like felled trees or puppets with cut strings. Everybody else, including Marcus and Phillip, my pillars of support, fell to their knees and groaned. That smell was back again. That knee leveling psychic stench of minatory corruption slammed into the sanctuary of the store and it was all I could do not to roll my eyes back in my head and join the vampires on the ground.

While Arturo was saying "What in hell?" Bracken took one look at me and said, "Oh fuck, its back." The two boys, hearing the nasty thuds and moaning voices popped their heads out of the playroom in the back corner, and suddenly my course of action became absolutely clear.

"Bracken, go take care of them," I barked. "Arturo—go make sure Grace is okay—this thing's bad and it's got to go."

Green was inside my head, panicked, and, from what I could tell, also otherwise engaged. *This thing is bloody awful—you know what this is?*

It was at the school today—I have no idea what it's doing here, but it's after us— can't you feel that?

No kidding, Corinne Carol-Anne! Green barked, and his voice was strained with worry for me, and with something else that was familiar and somehow inappropriate for the circumstances that he was trying to keep from me.

Green...what are you doing right now?

A mental grimace. *Bad question beloved. What is our plan?*

A plan...did I have a plan? *It's not afraid of sunshine*, I said, a little bit

afraid.

It's never tasted yours, he answered back. *And you have people to protect.*

A shield. "We'll need a shield," I said out loud. "A strong one. On the outside of the building..." Oh shit. "Phillip!" Phillip groaned, trying, I was sure, not to retch up his last meal—I knew that feeling well. "Phillip, dammit—who's out there?"

"What?"

"When you guys answered my panic-call—how many people that I haven't taken blood from are out there?"

Phillip shook his head, trying to pull it together, but the force that was making us all nauseous and weak gave a little surge, and not only did it send Phillip to his knees and me to the trash can to hover, just in case, but it also told us that we were **RUNNING OUT OF TIME**.

"Dammit, Phillip...who's out there?"

"Why does it matter?" he asked, his sharply handsome face nearly green with illness. "Just blast it...kill it...whatever it is..."

"FUCK IT ALL," I roared, "I will NOT be the source of any more innocent vampire deaths, do you hear me? You tell our people to clear out and you tell them to clear out **now!**"

"That pretty girl said the f-word," said a small voice into the ensuing silence, and I wanted to weep. Now Grace's grandchildren were going to think I was some sort of miscreant.

"It's okay," Bracken told him back, his voice tense, "She only swears when she's trying to help people." From across the room I caught Bracken's eyes with my own eye-roll—corny corny corny and terribly frightening at the same time.

"Phillip—the other vampires!" Vampires could read emotions, general presences, from those they had taken blood or sex from—in the first year of a vampire's life, his hungers were so huge, so all consuming, that, besides needing lycanthropes—shape-changers—around to feed, because they were harder to drain dry, a new vamp was often rolled from bed to neck to bed of his fellow kiss mates. That's why a kiss—a fully developed, well nurtured kiss—was even

better than a family. Phillip had been a stock-broker thirty years ago—by now, he'd shared blood or sex with every member of his kiss.

Phillip concentrated, hard, an effort that nearly brought him to his knees, and Green murmured some more in my head. *Beloved, that wasn't your fault.*

Mine more than anyone's, I told him truthfully. Being insane with grief did not absolve a person from guilt, I thought with more than a hint of panic.

"We're it," Phillip was saying with an effort. Another surge of mental putridity hit us, all, hard, and I fell to my knees, throwing violently up into Grace's trash can. "Do it, Cory," Phillip continued on a groan. "Everybody who heard your first summons is in here."

My body hurt, my head hurt, my *soul* hurt with the stench and the nausea and the queasiness of evil and crawling to the door was difficult and tortuous. There was shattered glass on the frame, and I sliced open my palm grabbing the metal, but that pain barely impinged on my list of aches. With a whine I closed my eyes and gathered my power, and the doorframe glowed, and the glow spread along the outside of the building, but it was a weak, fretful sunlight and it wasn't going to be enough.

Green... I called weakly, and Green was suddenly there, filling me with his scent and his mind and his *oh my God his sex...* in a flash I saw what Green had been doing while he was helping me save the world and it was both uncomfortable and highly arousing. We were merged, so for a moment, my mouth was filled with a smooth, strong cock that I didn't recognize, and then I was penetrated, in the only place Green *could* be penetrated, and a mouth, definitely feminine, was on a part of me that I didn't possess but that Green absolutely did, and my body was quivering, on the brink of orgasm, and only my grip on the merge between us kept me from spilling into a pool of liquid sex right there on the floor, in the middle of being attacked by fuck-all whatever it was.

The impression lasted a moment, a millisecond, actually, just long enough to fill my body with sex and surprise, and then Green closed his shield down so quickly I could barely feel his embarrassment, and his fear that I'd reject him for what I knew he'd left me to do. But the millisecond had worked its magic. For that moment, I wasn't susceptible to whatever it was that was leveling the vampires and me, and leaving the elves and humans who hadn't been sharing vampire blood alone. I suddenly had the strength and the power to grab the

doorframe tighter, ignore the blood trickling from my palm down the metal, and in a breath my sunshine grew strong.

Stronger and brighter, glowing yellow and azure and sunset orange and green and red. As I thought about Adrian, purposely coloring my power with something this thing, whatever it was, could understand, it began to burn purple, streaking violent violet lightning over the flat box of store fronts and tops to the East and forming a dome of light over the glass and wood mall to my left. The inside of the store went from being cold, reeking of the psychic stench of gangrenous flesh and rancid antiseptic to being warm, pleasant and green, smelling like mustard flowers and pinks and bottle-brush under the sun.

The screech of whatever it was that had brought on the attack echoed through my bones and blew out the remaining glass on the doors, but did not penetrate my sunshine shield. There was another scream, this one hurt, frustrated, and weak, and then suddenly, whatever started it was gone, and the attack was over.

I collapsed against the doorframe, with Green in my head. His presence was breathless and satiated, and I hurt and was scared and bleeding and exhausted, but I had the presence of mind to smile. *Was it good for you?* I asked, and felt something in his voice give a quiver of released tension.

As long as it was good for you, beloved. If he had stood before me, he would have been looking at me sideways, from his wide-spaced green eyed, and he'd be awaiting my opinion, my censure, my response.

Its not like I didn't know, I said kindly, in real life sitting back and leaning against the shattered doorframe in a puddle of blood and glass.

Knowing and feeling are two different things. He said carefully.

Nothing you do for love, pleasure, or to keep us safe would ever repel me, beloved, I said baldly, because my concentration was fading and I was going to have to deal with real life in a second and I couldn't afford to let Green be afraid my love for him could ever end.

There was a mental kiss in my forehead, almost as warm and definitely as tender as the real thing. *Have Marcus or Phillip lick your wounds, little Goddess,* he murmured, *and then let Bracken tend to you. Give Grace my love...I have some things to do here.*

My internal monologue gave a snark of laughter, and my external monologue barked an order. "Marcus," because Marcus was pulling himself up to his feet and moving determinedly around to make sure the other vampires would be okay, "Marcus, you need to come here and lick my boo-boos, because I'm going to need Bracken's help and I don't want to bleed out."

"Oh, Jesus..." Marcus griped, "A head wound? I'll be spitting up hair for days..." And with that I started laughing with relief, and couldn't stop until the slightly built vampire with the messy brown hair and kind eyes had licked my head, my palms, and my knees, stopping the blood the way vampires could do, by will and touch alone. He complained good-naturedly the whole time about how humans didn't have to worry about their food wiggling around on the table in front of them.

When he was done I called to Bracken, who brought the wide-eyed little boys out to me.

"Hey, guys..." I murmured, looking at Grace's grandbabies, "I hope I didn't frighten you at all..."

"You said the f-word!" The youngest piped up.

"And you made the store glow!" The oldest added, and I laughed a little.

"Yes, that's true, I did..."

"Gavin," The older one supplied, "And my little brother is Graeme."

I hoped none of my horror showed on my face. It was like naming a baby 'Walter'—who could look at a little wrinkled helpless baby and call him 'Gavin' or 'Graeme'? "Those are very good names," I lied baldly, hoping the Goddess wouldn't choose this moment to strike me with nausea and cramps for it. "But I need to ask you something..."

"What in the hell was that?" Grace said, barreling out of the back room and straight into Arturo's waiting arms. She took a moment to be embraced—if a bone-cracking bear-hug could be called an embrace—before she disentangled herself gently from Arturo and took a good look at me. "Why you?" she asked bluntly. "Why is it always you getting hurt? I don't see a scratch on Bracken...Arturo's fine...vampires are dandy..." This last was an overstatement, because the one's who hadn't taken my blood were barely staggering to their feet, but that wasn't her point. "But the only one here who's mortal? Noooooo...."

She's got to be covered in blood by the end of the night."

"Thanks, Grace," I returned with interest, "I was just about to ask Gavin and Graeme here if they needed their memories wiped, but I guess you just saved me from that uncertainty!"

Grace looked down at the two wide-eyed children and grimaced at me. "I guess we all need a little practice being human tonight, don't we?" she asked wryly, and I nodded stiffly. The cut on my head was closed but everything, from my toes up to the top of my head hurt; my whole body ached from being slammed against the cashier stand and then puking up my toes for the umpteenth time that day.

"Come along, guys..." she murmured gently, "Let's go see your mom and have a talk, okay?"

Arturo watched her go, and then turned a very contrite face to me. "Corinne Carol-Anne—I cannot tell you how sorry I am..." he said gently, then moved forward to take the back of my head in his hands, wincing as he did so. I sat meekly, looking at my lap, when suddenly I felt the buzz—the buzz I'd first felt when Arturo had touched me almost a whole year ago, and I had been drawn headlong into the world I now lived in full time. Arturo was healing me, I could feel it, but he was not a healing elf. He was a warrior elf, and suddenly the buzzing in my skin increased to the point where it felt like the buzzing of the tattoo needle that had covered my back this winter. Only a lot worse, I thought, trying not to wiggle and whine, because at least then I'd had a little preternatural anesthetic and now my head and my palm and even my knees were buzzing with blood pain.

I had just enough time to gasp, "Ouch, fuck, *gees* Arturo..." Before the buzzing rose to a pitch and with a small flash of red-gold light at the parts I could see (and I'm sure the back of my skull which I couldn't see) my wounds had closed, healed, just like that.

Arturo ruffled my hair, which was a bloody mess anyway, and patted my head kindly. "You will live, I think," he said dryly.

"Yeah, but I like it when Green heals me better." I rubbed the back of my head gingerly, because it still felt hot and buzzy.

"But of course. Bracken, she'll live—am I forgiven?" Arturo called, with

some humor, but with some humility too, which was rare for Arturo. Of the sidhe I knew, Arturo was the most arrogant, and the least likely to admit he had been wrong.

"You might be," Bracken responded in kind, over his shoulder. He was standing at the door, which he had propped open, and was talking to someone standing outside in what looked like a big pool of light. He said something to the person outside, then carefully closed the door and came towards me with suppressed urgency.

"Can I touch her?" he asked, his voice betraying his worry, and the strain of having to leave me because I was bleeding—just when he wanted to be near me most.

"You can always touch me, baby," I said throatily, and suddenly he was in front of me, holding my chin in his hands and examining me himself.

Bracken just shook his head and then helped me to my feet. I could tell, by the tenseness of his body that he was resisting pulling me into his arms with everything in his being, and his sudden proximity reminded me of the sex that had flooded me when Green let down his shields. I was exhausted from using power, I still hurt a little from throwing up, but, most pressing, I was now painfully horny.

"Swell," I murmured, leaning up next to Bracken anyway, drawing his strength into my skin like sunshine and still, still, feeling that urge to have his cock in my mouth, down my throat, his mouth on my cleft, his body in my...I shook myself then, knowing that part of what I was feeling was Green, but part of it was me, too, because between Green, Adrian and I there wasn't much we hadn't done. I just hadn't done it like that in a very long time.

"Yeah?" Bracken asked, his arm around my shoulders drawing me tighter. "You like being healed by Arturo, you're going to *love* this."

All I really wanted right now was Bracken, alone, so deep inside of me I could taste him in the back of my throat, but he hadn't been in my head with that terrifying, arousing glimpse of what Green did to keep us safe, and he obviously had something else in mind.

"What now?" I asked, keeping my self control in check.

"The press is here—they're calling it an electricity surge. They want to talk

to somebody, and Cory, you're the only one here who's not going to look damn strange on camera.

My arousal turned off like his words were a big ugly light switch and I put my hands to my blood matted hair. I looked over to Grace, but she was in full vampire mode, teeth and all, and was in the process of convincing her grandsons that they'd seen a power outage and nothing more—it wasn't going well, and I had time to wonder if maybe children got to remember magic when adults forgot it, but I was still taking stock so I moved on. The vampires were all on their feet — some of them shakily, but it didn't matter—they wouldn't show up on camera. The elves would, but the glamour that kept them looking human got weird and tricky on camera—some camera pictures kept the glamour, some of them revealed the unusual bone structure and pointy ears. Bracken was right—I was going to have to go deal with the media, and, judging from the new red strobe lights outside, the police as well. The last time I'd had to deal with the police they'd almost made me flunk out of school, and in spite of the fact that Officer Max had mellowed I still wasn't that fond of the boys in blue. But, as I looked around the store, a little desperately one more time, I realized that Brack was right. I was all they had.

Well, shit.

GREEN

Leading by a main strength

Ordinarily, Green was not a terry-robe kind of sidhe, but the sylph delegation of Marin County was in such a tizzy about the visit of their new leader that he didn't have the heart to do the towel-around-the waist thing that Cory found so very appealing. As it was, he saw Cory's broadcast while standing tensely in front of the television in the sylph guest room with his hair dripping down the back of the lush terrycloth, oblivious to the distressed murmur of the sylphs who felt that he should be reclining in bed and letting them tend to him.

"She is very...ordinary, your *ou'e'eir*, is she not?" asked Jason, the sylph leader, while swinging his bare legs over the edge of the bed.

"Human camera, human eyes," Green said briefly, knowing that Jason hadn't meant anything negative by the comment. Sylphs as a whole were both

lovely and a-sexual. They were attractive in order to attract other species, and they chose their gender when they chose a mate—the very ambitious would elect to mate with their sidhe leader. For Green to have chosen a plain woman as an *ou'e'eir* meant that the joining was truly for love; no magic, no biology, no forced bindings involved. And it meant that the binding ceremony that Green had just participated in with Jason and his other chosen leaders would truly give Jason's people the freedom they had hoped for.

Most sidhe were bisexual—between their longevity and their naturally sensual natures, both monogamy and heterosexuality were far too limited for a sidhe's carnal palette. This was both good and bad for the ambitious sylphs—it was good because it gave a sylph a lot more sexual freedom than his fellows enjoyed—their gender wasn't chosen by being the opposite of their mates, it was a matter of their own choice. It was bad because, while the leader could do whomever he or she pleased, the sylph binding was for life—more specifically, a sylph trying to break a bad mating would die in the backlash of breaking the mating spell. A faithless sylph was a dead sylph, and depending on how they bound themselves to their mates, both betrayer and betrayed would dissolve into a little puddle of faithless flesh. This binding varied wildly, because the sylphs were the Goddess' levelers—they mated with any of the Goddess' species, and occasionally with God's humans as well, and everybody had their own physiological weirdness, dictating how the sylphs would live and die. It made the sylphs furtive, timid creatures, so eager to please it was almost painful.

Mist, their previous leader, had neglected the sylphs almost to the point of extinction. Those sylphs that hadn't died had emigrated—either to Green's own land, or to the south of the state. Mist had been an elitist of the most offensive sort—he'd been able to use the sylphs strength to his advantage, but would refuse to admit he owed them anything for their fealty. Sylphs were sensual creatures—if their chosen mate refused to love them (hell, even a good hug would do!) they faded, growing thinner and less substantial, until one day they simply didn't exist. Several of Mist's sylph leaders had wasted away from sexual apathy. One of Green's first orders of business after Mist had died and the dust of Green's takeover had settled, had been to visit the sylph enclave and establish relations with a people he deemed quite important—and attractive—of the Goddess' get. Mist's ally, Goshawk, had been dispossessed as well, and his people, the Avians, also looked to Green now. Green was hoping to work out an agreement between the two species that would help take care of the Goddess' little limitations on both species.

But it was difficult. The scene Cory had interrupted earlier had been sensual and pleasurable, but the sylphs had also been desperate, dying to please, tense with desire; this terrible need had been, partly, why there had been so many of them.

The other part had been an experiment on Green's part, a hope, based on Nicky's duel binding to both Green and Cory.

"Do you think it worked?" Jason said, looking anxiously at Green.

Green barely shifted his attention from the screen. His 'ordinary' *ou'e'eir* was summoning a small smile for the television crew. The title under her picture read "Cory Green" and although Green was pretty sure there was more to her new name than that, his throat tightened with pride just seeing his name there next to hers. With a sigh he spared a look for Jason. The sylph's worries were legitimate, he knew.

"I can feel the binding already—you?"

Jason nodded excitedly. "That's four of us—four sylphs bound to our leader—four sylphs who can love each other, as well as you—we won't have to worry about dying...fading away..." The slightly built sylph—a very pretty young man, now that he'd chosen his gender—looked at Green with shining eyes. "Lord Green, you've saved us all."

Green spared a smile for Jason, and for Letty, Princess and Daniel who were sprawled, sated and naked, in the bed behind him. Tonight had been a very big night for all of them, and Green hated to dampen their happiness—and their triumph—with his own worry.

But sylphs as a whole were a compassionate people—they were meant to be nature's levelers, the perfect mates, and compassion helped guarantee that. Jason could see Green's distraction.

"It was more than a power surge, wasn't it?" he asked delicately. "It would have to be to make the news down here."

Green nodded. Cory gave one last, tense look at the camera, and suddenly her eyes caught someone she knew, someone she was happy to see, and her face relaxed, and she smiled. Next to him, Jason caught his breath just before the camera moved to Officer Max, trying to look official and in charge when he was obviously off duty. Renny was clinging to his arm, wide-eyed, so tiny she was

barely in the camera's range.

"It appears to be a power surge," Max was saying assuredly. "None of the shops appear to be damaged, and we're looking into the matter now."

"She's beautiful," Jason said dazedly beside Green. "How could I not have seen?"

"It's a selective beauty," Green murmured. "It only shines on those she selects." He smiled, more than a little bit smug. "I see it every moment I'm with her."

Jason touched his leader's hand, looking for attention and offering comfort. "What was it, then—that thing that frightened her enough to pull you out of our play."

Green shook his head and shuddered. "We don't know...Cory describes it as sort of a smell...a stench of evil—sort of like vampire, but it almost overwhelmed her in the middle of the day about forty miles from where it showed up tonight."

"A vampire. In the day." Jason's voice sounded hollowly. His animation disappeared, and he sat, stone like, on the edge of the bed. Behind him, Letty, Princess, and Daniel moaned and shivered, burrowing into each other for shelter and comfort, and a pit opened in Green's stomach.

"You've encountered this," he stated.

"Lord Mist was not interested in our problems," Jason said, so miserably that Green sat on the bed next to the little man and wrapped his long body around him.

"I am not Lord Mist," he replied, a certain hard edge to his voice. Mist would have a lot to answer for to the Goddess, Green thought with anger. Leadership had a price—it required integrity, compassion, and a belief that your people mattered, and Mist had possessed none of those things and now Green was left to pick up the pieces. If Green hadn't already been responsible for his old lover's death, he probably would have sought him out and killed him (or at least have had Cory kill him) for the frightened, miserable look on Jason's face alone.

Jason nodded, quivering and frightened, even as Green sought to soothe

him. "It terrorized us this summer," he said lowly. "Five sylphs between August and October, when Goshawk moved in..."

"Five sprites what?" Green asked sharply, knowing the answer, but still, disbelieving and angry. Damn Mist. Damn him, damn him, *fuck* him all to hell.

Jason shrugged, even in Green's embrace. "We wouldn't trouble you with this if your *ou'e'eir* hadn't been attacked," he murmured, and Green shook his head violently.

"You'd damn well better bother me with this, Jason—all of you!" Awkwardly, because he was half dragging Jason, he pulled himself onto the bed and opened his arms, allowing the other, slightly built sylphs to burrow into him, and into each other.

After a moment of shivering from them and calming sounds from him, he finally spoke, his voice serious and stern. "Listen to me, all of you. You are leaders of your people—anything that hurts your people hurts you. I can feel that from you right now, and I believe it, right?"

"Yes, Lord Green," Jason murmured against his chest.

"Good—well you understand that the only true power I have over you is the promise of safety I gave you, right?"

No answer there. Too many years of Mist, who felt that his very birth as a power-imbued *sidhe* was all that was required to earn him automatic obeisance.

"It's truth," Green said, trying not to roll his eyes at their complete lack of comprehension, and then he soldiered on. "I can't help you if I don't know what happened. And my *ou'e'eir* is naked without your help. So you need to give me details, am I being clear?"

They nodded, shivering against him, but no one ventured to talk and he sighed. They had been abandoned by their leader, bereft of love, and now, apparently, singled out and hunted by this daytime vampire. It would be, he thought with patience, a very long road convincing them that he and Cory could be their salvation.

Later, after he'd rolled the sylphan leaders to sleep, he summoned sprites to tend to his snarled hair and called Cory. Her voice, when she answered, was sated and tired, but alert. She had been laying in bed with Bracken, waiting for

his call.

"You look good on camera, luv," he said gently in response to her sleepy hello.

"Bullshit, Green." Even over the phone he could hear her eyes roll. "But it's nice of you to say so."

"Seriously—is everybody all right?"

She made a growling sort of grunt deep in her throat. "Grace isn't catatonic, I'm ambulatory, and the vampires have had the fear of God put into them," she summed up. "And, wonder of wonders, Bracken hasn't put me in a glass jar to be his sexual plaything in order to keep me out of danger and away from the big scary college campus." Her words were obviously not for Green's ear alone.

"The jar's in the shop," Bracken grumbled from behind her, and Green chuckled.

"Tell him he gets no sex if you're in a glass jar," he murmured.

"The cat's out of *that* bag," she replied, her sleepy voice dry. Then her voice sharpened. "Did it work, Green?" she asked. "Are the sylphs safe?"

Green sighed. "Well, yes the binding worked...but considering the fact that hearing about your run-in with whatever-the-crap-all it was scared them catatonic, I don't think safe is the right word."

Even over the phone he could hear her sucking air in past her lips and teeth. "That's bad," she said sharply. "Do they know what it is?"

Green growled a little in frustration. "I have no idea what they know...one mention of it and they fell completely apart... I had to spell them all to sleep just to get them to stop shaking.

"Oooh...that *really* is bad." Then suddenly, with humor, "Bracken, stop that..."

Green laughed. "Oh, no, by all means let him continue."

"Bracken...gees...no...Green, you may be able to make...penetrating...insights when you're being...uhm...penetrated, but..."

Green started to laugh at her choice of words, and then more as she only somewhat successfully fought Bracken off. "Well, if you're busy..."

"No...I mean I'm trying not to be and *dammit, Bracken, this is important!*" she finished on a note of exasperation. Bracken's low chuckle echoed in the background but it abruptly stilled when Cory added, "The sylphs were attacked by that thing too..." A low rumble from Bracken, then, "Green, do we have any idea how bad the attack went?" She translated.

"I think that five sylphs lost their lives—but I'm not even sure of that."

"Wonderful," she sighed. "Well, I've already told the vampires to only travel in twos, and the were-creatures not to go out of the hill without a full grown sidhe or a vampire in escort...I had everybody talk to our people outside the hill...I told them it smells like the evil dead and travels in the day and to stay the fuck away from it and..." she trailed off. "And that's all I could think of."

"It sound like you've got it covered." He was impressed, but then, she had always impressed him.

"Green, there's nothing really new under the sun, is there?" she asked out of the blue.

"Uhm..." he said intelligently, because she had thrown him for a loop.

"I mean, I'm a sorceress...you knew what I was as soon as you saw the power, didn't you?"

"Yes...but there's usually a reason for that power...ancestry, Goddess blessing, something...we were just to focused on getting you to accept it that we didn't dig any deeper..."

"Which is fine," she said flatly. "Because my parents' family come from your part of the world and I'd hate to find out I was your great-great-great-great times a thousand granddaughter or something."

"Impossible, luv," Green said gently, both amused and touched by her assumption that in order for him to love her they'd have to be related in some way. "I have no living children—you're safe from the sin of incest."

"Oh..." And he could hear her make the connection. No *living* children. And this was obviously something he didn't want to discuss on the phone while

Bracken was playing slap and tickle with her on the other side. "That must be part of your top three bad things," she said, alluding to a conversation they'd had when he'd confessed that Adrian's death hadn't been the worst thing that had ever happened to him—although, in his words, it had ranked in the top three. "Which we'll talk about later. I was getting to a point."

"By all means." Goddess, he loved her so much he ached with it.

"The point is that I'm not, like, a freak of the Goddess' nature. There are lots and lots of us out there, but we're not anything new." Bracken had been quiet in the background, and Green could hear his murmur in time with his own question.

"Which means..."

"It means that this thing has a ***name***. It means that *someone* has encountered it before—someone—probably a vampire, maybe even Andres, has heard a story or knew someone or read something in some old crappy book that was burned a thousand years ago about a vampire who moves in the daylight and stinks like evil."

"Ah," the light bulb suddenly went on over his head. "So you're talking research."

"Well, besides learning from the sylphs, yeah—you are out there talking to every freaking supernatural creature in Nor-Cal, Central, and Southern Oregon..."

"And Texas."

"Texas?"

"Gas station franchises, luv—I need to keep up our source of income."

"Ewww...A pan-sexual sidhe in Texas. I'm sorry."

"So am I, but you were getting to a point."

"Oh yeah..." Her voice tipped drunkenly and he wondered how much longer she'd be lucid. "Research. You're going to be talking to beings as old as you, and you're accepted in the vampire circles—you can do research."

"Not to sound juvenile, my dearest one, but, well, *duh*..."

Cory's seriousness broke into a giggle. "Sorry, Green."

"Not at all, luv. It is a very good point—you were just getting very..."

"Pedantic," she finished for him, and for the millionth time he wondered what it must be like for her to have those words in her brain and to rarely use them.

"Too right. Anyway, you're right. I'm out and about—I'll ask some pointed questions. The sylphs were either too afraid of Mist to tell him about the attacks or they told Mist and he blew them off."

"Fucker." The word, bit off angrily on the other end of the line, neatly summed up Green's opinion as well.

"Yes," he agreed. "But either way, this thing may have been around...it may even have attacked the humans, and just been labeled something else."

"A serial killer or something...hey—you do your research, I'll do mine."

"Good thinking...but not all tonight, okay?"

Cory laughed then, her voice tired, and he was reminded of all she'd done since he'd left her, miserable and distraught, that morning. Next to him, on the fine linen sheets, the sylphs murmured against the incursion of his voice, and thoughts of sleep became very sweet.

"No, sweetie, I won't do it all tonight. I even got Nicky to put date night off a day...to be honest, that whole 'smell of evil' thing has me a bit queasy."

"Good thinking," he said neutrally, hoping he didn't reveal how transparent she was. She'd only had one 'date night' so far, but her relationship with Nicky had been strained ever since, and he had no idea how to fix it. Without her physical contact, Nicky would die, and that was unacceptable to both of them. But the alternative didn't sit well on a fragile human who'd had three lovers in too short a time, but who had loved them all until death and beyond. Casual sex was not only not in her experience, it wasn't in her vocabulary—and although this was far from casual, it was intimacy with someone she only loved as a friend, and it was as hard on her as not being a true lover was on Nicky. It was hard on Nicky, it was hard on her, and he didn't have a clue as to how to fix it.

"I heard that," she said dryly, and he had to smile—whether she knew it or

not, she was in his head at least as often as he was in hers, only she used intuition and an almost uncanny ability to read people instead of gifts from the Goddess. "And before we get going on this subject when there's not a fucking thing either of us can do to change it, I think I should tell you that I redecorated my room."

Now *that* was a surprise. "With paint!" he asked, faintly alarmed. The panels in his home were hand-carved—by him—and he was a little protective of his beloved home.

"With magic," came the blurry reply. She was fading fast.

"On purpose?"

"Don't we all wish! Wouldn't that be nice? I want the living room done in Adrian purple, Cory...have some sex and cross your eyes and see what happens..." Even blurry, her sharp tongue could make him laugh.

"Well...how does it look?"

There was a rustle and Bracken answered directly into the mouth piece. "It looks wonderful, Green, but our girl is practically talking in her sleep—how 'bout we grill her another day, yes?"

"Don't let her out of yours or Nicky's sight, okay?"

"Like Nicky would be any help..."

"Bracken, you know that only makes it harder on her..."

"Yeah." Brack chuffed out a breath. "You're right. You're right you're right you're right and I'm being an asshole...it's just..." There was a sound, and Green assumed he was checking to see how far asleep Cory really was. There was a rustling of covers and a padding of feet, and then what Green assumed was the closing of the bathroom door. "Green, I wouldn't have any problem with it if she enjoyed herself... but..."

"But she's human and she can't chase the shame away." There was a leaden silence on the phone lines that spoke volumes.

"She could do it for you and Adrian," Bracken said unhappily.

"She's doing it for you," Green pointed out kindly.

"Why can't she do it with Nicky?"

"Oh Bracken, I'd think that answer was obvious..."

"It is," Bracken murmured, "I just didn't want to presume."

"Well presume away, because she's really going to need you after her date with Nicky, and it won't help if you don't see that."

"I wasn't much help tonight," Bracken said, the bitterness strong enough to taste.

"Don't blame yourself because you're not a vampire—apparently they're the only ones this thing affects."

"I don't blame myself for not being a vampire," Bracken spat, almost against his will. "I blame Adrian for marking her that third time and not preparing her for what it would mean."

Another silence, this one so filled with pain that Green was surprised the sylphs didn't wake up drowning in it. "He was dying at the time, Bracken—I think it was one last kiss..."

"Why couldn't he have kissed you...or me for that matter...why did he have to mark the one person he loved who would be hurt the most?"

Green's throat tightened and he could hear tears in Bracken's voice. This was the first time either of them had spoken aloud about the final mark on Cory's neck, and what it cost her to wear their lover's final kiss on her soul. "You know the reason for that too, my brother," he said at last. "Because as much as we loved him, he was not perfect."

"Fuck."

"Crawl back into bed, Bracken. Hold her next to your heart, and be thankful that you can do so. We'll research this threat, we'll face this enemy, and we'll protect each other. It's all we've got."

"You're all we've got," Bracken said at last. "I love you leader. Be safe."

"You too. Good night."

I love you, leader. Be safe. The words echoed in Green's head as he lay in the strange bedroom, surrounded by the still, quietly breathing bodies of the

bespelled sylphs. So many ways Bracken could feel about Green, who had been Adrian's beloved and then Cory's, and what he said from his heart was *I love you. Be safe.* He was a good man, Bracken Brine Granite op Crocken. Op Crocken Green, now, and that thought filled Green with pride. They had all taken his name. All his new children, all of his new *lovers*, and they had deliberately taken his name and bonded themselves into a family. It was something he had trouble getting his own people to do, with their traditions and their pride and their absolute certainty that they were the Goddess' chosen ones and that no one else could measure up. But with the addition of Cory, and the death of Adrian, it was happening on a larger and larger scale. The mark that those who had fought in the city now bore on their bodies was proof of it, and those of the sidhe on his hill who hadn't been there to be marked had gone out and acquired their own heart's blood tattoos to show their deference to him, and to Cory as well. If Green had taught the people in his hill one thing, it was that there was safety in family, and with their triumph in San Francisco, there was pride in family as well.

And there was responsibility in being the leader of such a large family, and with that responsibility came fear for them. He sighed. The four bodies burrowing into his now counted as family. And now he had an obligation to them, just as he did to his hill. And that's why he was here, and Bracken was with Corinne Carol-Anne Kirkpatrick op Crocken Green.

I love you leader. Be safe. And more than a little bit lonely.

CORY

Dating Skills

The next day we did very little. The store would be closed tonight, because, although the brownies and sprites would have the door fixed and the inventory stocked and the electricity back in a day, none of the other stores would be ready, and we didn't want to stand out, so none of us (and we were mostly were-creatures and mid-level fey) needed to go in. I slept in late, with Bracken, and we met Max and Renny in the upper level kitchen for a long breakfast. I'd put out some serious power the night before, something that always drained me physically, and I was ready for a nap after we had all done our time on the phone to enroll in our classes. Bracken bitched some more about that—but this time he had reason. I mean, of all things, why did six people who weren't remotely human need a human sexuality course? But all the other selections made sense, so even that was half-hearted.

Green called around eleven, to tell me that he would be 'otherwise engaged' with the sylphs that night—something he felt he had to do because now that he'd mentioned the big black hanging stench of evil to the leaders, the entire sylphan enclave was trembling with complete fear. Green mentioned lots of picnic blankets and being outside, so I assumed he was going for a couple of sylph orgies in the woods to chill them out. The thought of my sidhe lover making love in the woods made everything from my nipples on down tingle, and before the nap, I made Bracken a very happy man.

The day was so kick-back that when I awoke from my nap to find it dark outside, I was a little surprised to see Grace sitting in the kitchen, staring at the phone with such intensity that I was afraid it would burst into flame. I mean, she was a vampire, and her eyes were whirling—it seemed like *something* should have been happening.

I sat next to her and stared at the phone, wondering what was up.

"Chloe said she'd call me tonight," Grace said quietly. "We couldn't wipe the boys, but I gave her a choice, as to whether she wanted her memories or wanted me to take it all away—she said she'd call me tonight."

Oh. Well. I looked at the phone apprehensively, waiting for it to ring and

break Grace's heart.

Renny and Nicky wandered in, and asked us what we were doing. "Chloe's calling back tonight," I explained, and now there were four of us, staring at the phone in quiet agony. We all loved Grace.

A group came in—Sweet and Corge, two of Green's higher sidhe lieutenants, and Leah and Anthony, were-pumas. They looked at us, then looked at each other, and Sweet shook her head. "Humans," she said bemusedly, although none of us were human anymore, then she and Corge wandered outside. Leah, a pretty, dark haired girl who had been one of the last of Adrian's saved before me, sat down next to me, with Anthony behind her. Bracken wandered in and parked himself behind me in a similar way.

"What the hell are we doing here?" Leah asked casually after a few minutes of breathless silence.

"We're waiting for Grace's daughter to call," I breathed back, and to everybody's surprise, Leah started laughing.

"My God—don't you know a watched phone never rings? Do you people remember *anything* from your dating days?"

"I haven't dated in forty years," Grace retorted, "And when I was dating, it was my childhood sweetheart—the guy I married."

"On my first date ever Adrian bit me on the neck," I said musingly. "I don't think I've ever had to wait for a phone call after that."

"We didn't count in San Francisco?" Nicky asked in mock hurt.

"Absolutely not."

"Why not?"

"For one thing, Renny was there," I answered promptly. "For another, I didn't shave my legs and you didn't pay."

"Important criteria to remember," Bracken breathed in my ear.

"My legs were shaved yesterday," I told him sweetly. "What about you, Renny?"

"If you don't count the guy my parents set me up with for the prom, my

first real date was with Mitch. I spent my time giving him a blow job so intense he *had* to bite me so we'd spend the rest of our lives together," she said, so casually that she didn't see the rest of us turning our heads slowly from the phone to stare at her. "It worked, and now I'm furry." And Mitch, sweet, lost Mitch, wasn't here to share it with her.

Grace blinked at tiny, fragile looking Renny in shock. "Renny, sweetie—if that was your first date ever, how did you know how to give that blow job?"

"Porn," Renny replied obliviously, her eyes still fixed on the phone. "Lots and lots of porn."

Our mouths sank slowly open, and about the time they hit bottom, the phone rang. Grace grabbed for it so frantically it knocked out of her hand and into Leah's lap, and Leah, in spite of her earlier mockery, picked it up quickly, and with surprising gentleness put it back into Grace's hand, where it rang one more time. With a deep breath—a residual human gesture—Grace pressed the talk button and raised the phone to her ear.

"Hello?" Breathless silence. Deep human sigh. "Hi, Chloe. Yes, it really is me."

The rest of us melted out of the kitchen like fog. On our way out, hand in hand with Bracken, I saw Nicky give me a long, considering kind of look, and then he smiled, brightly, like a child with a secret. We retired to the living room, Renny and I with knitting, the others with books and c.d. players, and other diversions, and we sat quietly, like those people you see in movies like *Sense and Sensibility* and *Emma*. We talked softly or played games or read or, well, knit. Corge and Sweet came out with an ancient backgammon board, and Bracken's parents brought out a Lord of the Rings chess game and soon the living room was easily busy with fifteen or so of Green's people, as it was every night we didn't have a formal banquet in the great burnished hall downstairs. Often we watched movies or television, but *Twenty-Four's* season hadn't started yet, and tonight, we just sat, like family, and chatted back and forth and enjoyed each other's company.

I knew that, in four other parts of Green's great house that tunneled through the better part of this hill that straddled the landscape change of the foothills, there was a similar scene of people gathering. In the summer when this had happened it had been in an atmosphere of anxiety, because we'd been under attack. In the fall, I'd been too hurt from Adrian's death to even come out of bed

on my frantic, starved weekend visits. But since I'd come home before Christmas and had stayed willingly, and in peace, I'd grown accustomed to the evening mélange of Green's and Adrian's people. Green and I often visited the other family rooms like parents visiting their children's rooms at night. Or a monarch and his lady would visit their subjects, to make sure all was well.

The vampire's family room sat low in the basement of the darkling. It had a plush burgundy rug, and giant leather couches the color of oxblood. The vamps tended to watch way too many horror movies for my taste, but they were always happy to see me, so they'd pause the movie and talk to me about their rising, who was sucking on whom, and who had seduced a mortal that worried the rest of the kiss.

The lower fey had two speeds—a thousand miles a minute and passed out in the corners of their vast 'attic' of a sitting room. Green had decorated it with ornate old furniture with lots of nooks and crannies, and if you looked very carefully there you could always find sleeping (or fornicating) sprites, fairies, gnomes, pucks, pixies, little trolls, gremlins, and yawksnatawni (the Native American counterparts to all of the above). When Green and I visited, the swarm of chittering, swarming littles would stop and flock around us, telling us stories that often had no beginning, no end, and no single voice. We would nod our heads appreciatively and answer in the right places and they would touch our faces and stroke our hair and occasionally, curl up on our shoulders and coo at us until they slept, tangled in our hair.

The mid-level fey, the sylphs, nymphs, red-caps, kelpies, ogres and everybody else a body could name all seemed to hang out with the were creatures in a center room of the middle floor—it was a vast room of dark, weathered boards and shiny brass. This room was raucous, with a pool table, a dart board, and lots of beer—in spite of the fact that none of the species actually got drunk, and drugs had no effect on them, they all seemed to like the taste of beer. There was arm wrestling, poker, and the occasional honest fight that ended in camaraderie and singing of old rock and roll songs. This was a bar like my father had gone to, when he was in the mood, and my friends had borrowed their older brothers and sisters drivers licenses to get into when I'd had friends in high school. Green and I would always be asked to share a table, and share a drink. I wasn't twenty-one yet, and I hated alcohol. They kept soda under the bar, on ice, just for me.

The high sidhe—the baen sidhe, daonie sidhe, and the occasional tuatha de

danaan held a more dignified court. I had tried to get Green to explain which one he was, and which one Bracken was, but he had simply shrugged. "Some of the Goddess' get like to put themselves into little slots with labels, luv. Bracken, me, Arturo, even Mist and some of the others—we just prefer to be." But the ones who grouped themselves in this room—Green had allowed them to decorate it with richly colored silk hangings and low-slung lounging seats and cushions—may have known their station and their slot and their label, but they did not print it clearly and wear it on their foreheads. They came in all colors (as did the littles and the mid-level fey) from magenta to azure in both hair and skin, and they often sat, reading poetry (mostly by mortals) and singing or playing instruments that even Shakespeare and Milton had not known of. When we visited, they all stood and bowed, and clasped silky, scented hands with my plain warm mortal ones. In the summer, the high sidhe had resented me and my place at Green's side, but Adrian's death, and our subsequent victory in San Francisco had softened their vision of me, and I was treated with nothing but deference and grace. They respected my education, in the high sidhe room, and I had learned more about literature and history from these creatures who had lived it than I often learned from my professors who had devoted their lives to trying to know it.

But as exotic as the rest of Green's vast hill could be, my favorite place in it was still the living room with the clean light oak and white brocade where I'd woken up, scared and bewildered, the morning after I'd seen the uglier side of the supernatural world I'd entered—and had wanted it even more. Green's sitting room attracted a little bit of everybody. Bracken's parents were mid-level fey. Bracken, Green, Corge, Sweet, and Cocklebur were higher fey. The Avians either sat with us, or with the shape changers, and not all of them any one place on a day. Renny and I had been inseparable since Adrian's death, and that didn't change now, and the sprites and littles seemed to have developed a true affection for me that even Green couldn't explain. They would hover about my person until Bracken or Green would wrap warm, tender arms around me, or nuzzle my cheek or touch my skin, when they'd scatter, waiting to perch again.

They hovered tonight, as I sat and leaned against Bracken, knitting a sweater for him. I had grown up an only child, and my father was a trucker, and my mother waited tables at night. I think the thing I loved most about Green's hill was these quiet moments of massive, sometimes quarrelling, but always bonded family. This was Green's hill. This was my home. And it was threatened once again, and now, more than ever, I'd kill to defend it.

The next night was date night. Renny and Bracken sat in my room and gave wardrobe advice. Renny tended to advise towards the hot and chic—skin hugging, tummy baring sweaters, low-riding jeans with lace-up sides. Bracken, for all that he'd been wearing a mullet and seducing mortals that dressed just like that, tended towards the classic—mid-thigh skirts, flattering, button-up blouses, lacy shawls. His gift to me this Christmas had been a hand-made knit shawl made out of something glittering and silver/gold, so fine and soft and lofty that I was terrified of wearing it, because it was so beautiful and so precious. He came up to me this night, and wrapped it around my bare shoulders as I looked critically at the sleeveless black turtleneck and matching skirt that I'd finally settled on.

"That's perfect!" Renny breathed, delighted.

"No," I muttered, trying not to scrunch my face. I turned to Bracken and touched his fine-boned, proud jaw and suddenly there was only the two of us in the world. "I won't wear this for anyone but you, beloved."

"Then wear it for me tonight, and enjoy yourself," he said softly. "Remember that I love you, and I love you as much for what you do to save your friend as I love you for what you do willingly with me, and don't worry about being awkward or disappointing. Go and have fun. Humans go on dates to have fun."

Have fun. Fair enough—I could do that. "Uhm..." I didn't want to ask. I had no right to ask.

"I'll be here when you get back," he said, as though suddenly he was in my head like Green. "No matter when you get back."

I nodded and managed a shaky smile. "Are you sure the make-up's okay?" I asked Renny one more time.

"How in the fuck would I know?" She shot back. "The last time I wore make-up was for my Senior Ball photo."

"Who'd you go with?" I asked in abstraction. I knew it couldn't have been Mitch.

"Chad Collins," she said in disgust.

"Charming Collins-glass?" I asked in surprise. He'd been in my class,

actually, and even I had heard of his reputation.

"Who?" Asked Bracken, a little lost.

"He was the high school Lothario," I replied, suddenly embarrassed. "He had sort of a reputation for..." I stopped and probably turned fuchsia. Bracken's quizzical look suddenly blossomed into a full fledged smile.

"Of being as big around as a Collins glass," Renny finished dryly. "I never found out, but not because he didn't try."

"What's a Collins glass?" Brack asked, clearly intrigued now.

Renny held her tiny hands together, thumb tucked well under thumb, fingertip to fingertip. "It's a tumbler, about this big around and about yeay high."

Bracken grinned suddenly, and took in my brightly colored face. He started to laugh then, delightedly. "Stop gloating," I murmured under my breath, and was saved from the rest of this horribly awkward conversation by Nicky's hesitant knock at the door.

So that was how I answered the door, flushed from thinking about Bracken's sex and dolled up to the nines. Nicky's eyes glowed, brilliantly, when he took me in, and he executed a neat little bow, taking my hand up for the kiss.

"You look amazing," he said, "And perfect for where we're going."

"Thanks," I said, then, sincerely, "You look pretty spiffy yourself." He had on a silvery green dress shirt and grey slacks, and looked older than he had the day before yesterday in the lobby at school. "So, where are we going?"

It was a preternatural dance club, actually, tucked away behind a church on Bell Road, skirting the newly developed strip-malls that kept springing up around the foothills like mushrooms. It was run by Mitch's older brother, Ray—I remember Green making him the manager there, to give him something to do after his brother's death. And Ray, who had been lost, moving from one small time band to another before his brother's death had taken the show of responsibility and run with it. He called it *Mitchell's Alley*.

It had been magicked, and spelled well, so the outside looked small, about the size of a regular ranch style house, but the inside was huge, with vaulted ceilings and a good sized stage and dance floor. In the darkness I could see that

the walls were rough-hewn wood, and the strobe lights were as much magic as electricity. There was a bar—burnished wood with brass—and a small kitchen hidden off to the side. The interior was crowded with supernatural creatures—so much so that if I summoned even the least little bit of power, they practically made the room glow—but they were moving to the heartbeat of bass and drum like any other humans, the music was throbbing and loud, and for the first time in my life, I felt like I was on a real date.

It was actually sort of fun.

I'd never gone out dancing before—the closest thing I'd ever come to it was dancing to my boom-box in my own bedroom. Dancing in a club, surrounded by beating bodies and a visceral commitment to the music that vibrated up from the souls of our feet, was a skin-tingly, womb-throbbing, breath-catching sort of rush. On the dance floor, it didn't matter that I didn't love Nicky like I should have. What mattered was that his hand on my midriff felt warm and possessive and *good*. What mattered was that the hard line of his front against my back was electric, and the music *forced* our pelvises to tilt, to grind, to make contact with each-other, and the things he said in my ear, while not crazy-sexy erotic, were funny, and charming, and witty, and it made me want to stay close to him with the intimacy of noise cocooning us together. The sheer joy of physical activity after a month of being sick or treated like an invalid was actually sort of a turn on in itself, but the truth was, I had been sick, and I had been donating blood almost nightly, and I was grateful when, after forty-five minutes or so, Ray Hammond came wading through the mass of people to tap me on the shoulder and gesture for me to follow him off the dance floor.

Back by the kitchen there were people yelling food orders for the limited food menu, people hollering drink orders for the extended drink menu (mostly juice, but some of the weres still drank alcohol for taste), and the crash of pots, pans, glasses and bottles, but it was *still* quieter than the dance floor. Ray had his brother's dark hair and poet-brown eyes, but he had lines of grief etched on his face, and a toughness to his jaw that Mitch had never had the chance to develop. Tonight, his expression was a combination of worry, irritation, and embarrassment.

"I hate to bother you, Cory," he started out. "I mean, I know its date night and everything."

I felt my eyes widen—did every preternatural creature in Nor-Cal know

about date night? But Ray kept going and my personal life faded into the background.

"Normally I'd wait until Arturo or one of the vamps made the rounds, you know—but you're here, and this...Lady Cory, this guy is bad."

I'd gone to school with Mitch and Ray—although, admittedly, I'd been a Freshman when Ray had been a Senior—and ordinarily the absurdity of the 'Lady Cory' would have made me laugh, but he was getting more and more agitated, and he was asking something of me that it was my obligation to give. Hey, Green's gotta get laid in the woods, I gotta kick bad guy ass, right?

"What is he?" I asked, seriously.

Ray shook his head, and because he was a were-cat the gesture made it look like one of those shivery things that cats do when they wake up from a nap. "He's a were of some sort, but...there's something off about him, Cory. He's...I mean, you know how I became were-cat, right?"

From the infected needle of a were-creature who hadn't yet figured out that drugs didn't work on a were-cat's metabolism. Mitch had used the same needle, and, *poof*, like that, no more drug problem. And a whole host of other issues to deal with—all things were a trade off.

"Yeah, I know."

"Well, this guy—I'm sure he's buzzing. I shot smack for two years—I know when someone's riding on something...this guy...he's jonesing...I know it."

"Jonesing on *what*?" Nicky asked. He'd stayed behind me, his hand still wrapped around my waist, his body still intimately close to mine, and it hadn't occurred to me to move. "As far as I know, there's nothing out there that will get us buzzed."

"I don't know." Ray shook his head, "But he's like any other drunk obnoxious customer, except I don't want him to change into whatever the hell he is, because the danger of this place is that you've got hormones, pheromones, and big sex music—one strong change, in plain sight of everybody else, and this place becomes a zoo in mating season."

Swell. My own attraction for Nicky dimmed a little, and we took a mutual

step away. I'd always wondered how Leda had managed to get ravished by that swan, but I certainly didn't want to see how it worked with a big predatory Avian.

"Where is he?" I asked with a confidence I didn't feel.

The look of relief on Ray's face was gratifying and terrifying at once. What if I got clobbered? Then I heard the angry voices by the corner of the bar closest to the kitchen, and all thoughts of fear disappeared.

"What in the fuck do you mean I'm cut off? I'm not drunk, bitch—where in the fuck is the manager of this shithole?"

This was Ray's place—this was *Green's* place, and nobody talked shit like that in Green's place.

"I'm sorry," I said, moving on my own past Ray to where the owner of that slurred voice stood. "Can I help you?"

"Only if you're the fucking manager." I squinted at the young man, power in my eyes, and tried to figure out why he was so...so...psychically *blurry*. He should have been a good looking young man in his early twenties, a were of some sort, with blonde hair and blue eyes. But something was off. His hair, which should have been the color of wheat was faded...it looked like wheat colored yarn which was more grey than gold. His eyes had once been as blue as Adrian's, I'm sure of it, but something had...faded them out... they were dirty blue now, like the sky in L.A. His bone structure, his musculature...everything was shading out, like a vampire in a photograph. And judging from his swagger and his obnoxiousness, part of his personality had gone with his physical/metaphysical appearance. And to add to the faded look of the junkie, he *smelled*.

"I'm the owner's woman, sweetheart," I said absently, "And who have you been letting *feed* off of you?"

"I'm not taking no orders from no cunt banging the owner." The guy smirked, and the really obscene word (to a girl used to dirty language) shocked me away from my speculations and right into the here and now. Without thinking about fear, I grabbed the front of the guy's oversized rap-hero sweatshirt and pulled him to me, face to face. My other hand went behind me, opened, and Nicky slapped his hand in mine—it's a smart man who knows when to be a

friend, when to be a lover, and when to be a battery.

"That's fine, asswipe," I growled, "Because this cunt isn't taking any orders from a jerkoff who doesn't know he's being poisoned and bled dry. Now tell me this, asshole, who is feeding from you?" I'd done this before, almost inadvertently with Officer Max. When you asked a question with power in your voice, with a bone deep certainty and a lot of fucking magic at your disposal telling you that you deserve a good answer, even strong minds feel compelled to buckle. This guy was jonesing on something, someone was bleeding him to death, and his mind was nowhere as strong as Max's mind. His face went immediately slack, tears formed at the corners of his eyes, and he wobbled as he stood. "I don't know," his voice trailed off. "I don't remember. But it feels...it feels..." His voice became dreamy, sexy, the voice of a junkie talking about a fix. "It feels soooooo good."

"Okay," I said, nodding. This was bad. If this guy couldn't remember who was poisoning him, we couldn't get to the malignant source of this disturbance. I looked up to see who the guy was with, expecting a posse of similarly dressed obnoxious scumbags, but what I saw instead was a tired looking little were-woman, tears in her eyes, looking on the asshole in my hands with the sorrow of a loved one watching her beloved slide into madness. "So you don't know who's making you into a giant hemorrhoid—can you tell me who made you?"

"Jon Chase," he said sadly. "He's dead now."

I blinked. I knew the names of the were-creatures who had died when Crispin and Sezan had made their moves last summer, and this was not one of them. *Marcus*. I gave out the mental call and got an almost immediate, startled response. *No, no...don't panic...who knows the roster of the weres right now?* It used to be Adrian. The were creatures made a convenient, friendly, renewable food supply—and just like Green took care of his people, Adrian had trained the vampires to take care of theirs.

I do. Marcus said readily in my head. It was weird talking to the vampires like this, actually...when I pictured the vampire to talk to him, I could taste his blood in my mouth. *Why?*

Jon Chase. Ring any bells?

Not a one.

Well we need to find out who he looked to—he's dead, and one of his children is here at Mitchell's Alley, and he's seriously fucked up.

Do you need back up?

Goddess bless him. No—but I do need clean-up. Send someone over here to pick this guy up and see what's poisoning him. Sudden thought. And Marcus, don't let anybody feed off of him...I've got a very bad smell... wait a minute...In fact, I've got a really familiar smell off this guy, if you know what I mean.

He did. There was a sudden impression in my head of four different vampires fluttering towards my location, and a reassurance that, if I brought this guy outside, he would be taken care of. *Finish up your date. Leader. We all like Nicky.* Marcus finished with, and I felt myself flushing, even in my head. Everybody really did know what I was going to do with Nicky tonight, and why. Fucking beautiful.

"Okay, asshole," I said almost to myself, and the guy actually jumped. I realized that everybody—Ray, Nicky, the guy I was shoving against the bar, his girlfriend, hell, even the bartender, everybody!—had been waiting in breathless anticipation while I apparently solved quadratic equations in my head. "Don't stress, it's all good. We're going to hook you up with some real vampires, not the evil undead trash you've been hanging with, and we're going to see what you've been fucking with. But right now, I need to know two things—what's your name, and who do you look to?"

"My name?" And I suddenly ached for this guy—he really looked like he couldn't remember. "He calls me Lean Cuisine."

Oh, ewwww. A bad guy with a bad sense of humor. And no respect for this guy as a person, apparently.

"Well, that sucks for you, sweetie," I said with real sympathy. "But what did Mom and Dad call you?"

"I...I don't..." Mom and Dad were too far away, I guessed, either in affection or in distance, or even in last time he'd visited.

My voice lowered, and I looked at the miserable, dark-haired, sloe-eyed woman huddling behind the guy. "Okay, sweetheart, what do you call your beloved?"

Suddenly the boy's blurry features grew solid, real, grounded. This was real, I thought. This was probably the last real thing left to him. "Ellen," he said softly. "Ellen Beth Shrick Williams."

I felt my eyes tear up, just a little. Ellen Beth Shrick Williams may have just saved her husband's life. "She took your name, didn't she?"

A sudden, sweet smile of pride. "My girl loves me."

Swallow. "Okay, Mr. Williams, we'll remember the rest later. Right now, we're going to get you the hell out of here before your madness spreads, right?"

A weak nod, and my nerveless fingers released their clench on Williams's shirt. Ray took the guy by the elbow, giving me a disbelieving stare, and Ellen Beth turned to follow. I called after her, and she turned to me reluctantly. Well, I could be a scary bitch.

"His name's Christopher," she said softly, fidgeting with her purse strap. "And he didn't used to be like this."

"What are you?" I asked, and she understood that immediately.

"Dogs," she said with a smile. "Sort of like Labrador Retrievers, but taller and dappled." I understood completely—like the kitties and the Avians, they didn't turn into any specific *breed* of their creature, but more into their own personality's interpretation of that creature. She'd said it with sort of a proud little smile, and I knew that most were-animals were proud and happy to talk about their furry sides.

"I bet you're beautiful," I said gently. Then, grimly, with purpose, "But I need to know what he's been looking like lately."

Ellen Beth shivered. "It started about a month ago—he met some guy at school..."

"Sac State?" My attention sharpened.

"Yes...Chris only had a semester to go...but ever since Christmas...he didn't get his financial aid, he didn't re-register..."

"Did he tell you why?"

She shook her head. She couldn't have been much older than I was, but

suddenly she looked aged and worn. "And his...his animal...he's getting clear on the edges...and mean...Chris never used to be mean..."

"Does he smell different?" I asked, wondering...only the vampires and I had been able to smell it so far.

A negative shake of the head. "No...but he...*sounds* different. His voice doesn't sound like his own...when he's turned, his breathing sets my hackles up."

Well...vampirically evil synesthesia...that was no help at all.

"We'll try to help him," I said, chewing on my lower lip in worry. "But we'll need whatever else you can remember. Some vampires are going to be outside to take him with them—I want you to go as well. He said someone named Jon Chase made him—who do you guys look to?"

Ellen Beth shrugged. "No one. We come from Southern California—we all sort of just left each other alone down there. Jon came with us—I haven't seen him in a while. He hooked up with a new...I thought it was a girlfriend, but I saw them together about a month ago, and it was a man—a really good looking guy—I didn't know Jon swung that way, but he seemed really happy. Until Chris said that just now, I had no idea he was dead." Her voice caught then, thickened, as though this news had just caught up with her.

Great. "Well, we look after each other up here—the vampires care for the were-folk, the were-folk feed the vamps, the sidhe watch the vamps in the day..."

"She? Who's she?"

"Elves? Fey? Really tall, beautiful, immortal people?" There *must* be fey in So-Cal, right?

Ellen Beth laughed then. "You mean like fairies?"

"The tiny ones, yes...but that's sort of an insult to the full grown sidhe, so you might want to forget that word." Nicky shifted next to me, not impatiently, but still. I sighed. "Look—I'm on a date here—and in my world that's more important than it sounds. I'm going to leave you with the vamps—they'll take care of you, they'll take care of Chris—they're going to roll his mind and try to get some more info, but they won't snack off of either of you, so don't panic, okay? They're going to take you to Green's hill—I'll be there later tonight. I've

got school Monday morning..."

"So do I!"

"Good. You can ride with us if we don't resolve this tomorrow—stay with us, in fact. I'll have Grace set you up a room..."

"Now wait just a minute..."

"No," I said shortly. "I really can't. Something has already attacked us—something that has apparently taken a big chunk out of your beloved's mind. You're in danger, he's almost lost, and we're the people who can take care of you and keep you safe. You don't want our help, I can't force it on you, but your husband has no choice. He's a danger to my people the way he is, and that cannot be allowed. You can go with the vampires—and with him—or you're on your own with that big nasty whatever the fuck it is out there to get you too...I feel for you, you'll never know how much...but right now, those are your choices."

Ellen Beth looked at me, stunned and frightened, and I took pity on her. I felt my face, which had been in an all hard and military, trying to prove I'm actually a leader kind of mode, soften a little bit.

"It'll be all right—you can come and go as you please—I just think you're in danger, and I know Chris is a danger to himself and to us."

She swallowed then, and nodded, and I gave a little mental chirrup to Marcus about what I'd just decided, and got the *all's good* in return.

With Nicky at my side then, we moved outside and joined Ray and his charge in a clearing beyond the parking lot, about twenty yards from the club itself. We could hear the music, throbbing clearly in the crystal night, and my hips shifted. I had been free on the dance floor, I thought sadly, and now I was outside of that freedom, bound by my duty. Of course, one glance at Ellen Beth's face, and suddenly the constraints of duty didn't seem like such a bad thing, and I let go of a sigh on a shiver of plumed breath. It had stopped raining this morning, so there were still big, weighty clouds scudding across the sky, but past them you could see brilliant and close, diamond stars and purple-black void. It was a lovely night, if not a freaking cold one. I had wrapped my shawl around my waist in the overheated dance floor, but now Nicky, in a show of chivalry that surprised me, loosened the knot and pulled the baby-bunny soft wool around my shoulders, and, like magic, I was warm again. He rubbed his hands over my

arms, and I leaned back into him in gratitude.

"Nice move, Kestrel," I approved lightly.

"I've been studying up," he murmured in my ear.

"There's a book on this?"

"No. I've been watching Bracken and Green," he said it levelly, as though broaching a difficult subject, and I did my best to make it an easy one for him.

"Good choices, both," I replied, and heard him breathe out in relief.

We stood there, under the dark-mottled sky, until the darkness started to flutter majestically, and black sails obscured the moon. Watching vampires come in from a distance is like watching a movie where things get bigger in super-fast forward with a strobe light. There's a heartbeat, and you see a slight motion. Another pulse, and it's a bat. A throb of blood thunder in your ears and it's a condor. Another crush of blood, whooshing your breath from your lungs, and it's a human sized creature with a pale flash of skin and a sail of black trench coat and then Marcus comes to a completely still stop, only a few feet in front of me, three other vampires setting down lightly at about the same time. They all looked so imposing coming in like a black sail of doom that I was forced to giggle when Marcus gave me a casual 'hullo' and that shy grin.

"Heya Marcus," I said with a smile. "Where's Phillip tonight?"

Marcus grimaced. "He's found a new lunch-buddy—eating out tonight."

I rolled my eyes. Phillip and Marcus had been strictly heterosexual as humans, but that first frightening year of blood hunger and skin hunger and flesh hunger tended to make impossible bedfellows merely strange. Being so completely hetero, and forced into a position where drawing lines in the chromosome pool was pretty much impossible, had made Marcus and Phillip into a sort of Chandler/Joey pair of roommates with the occasional sexy twist. As a pair, they equaled one solid leader, or two fantastic lieutenants. As a couple they were constantly on the odds because someone was always looking for a little bit of poontang with his lunch.

"I thought he was snacking on Tasha these days," Ray asked with some curiosity. It always helped to know the ins and outs of the preternatural dating scene when you were running one of the few almost exclusively preternatural

clubs in the area.

Another twist of that quietly handsome face. "Sometimes, when she's not trying to rip out his intestines with her hind claws." He turned towards Chris and Ellen Beth. "So—are these our new lost?"

I blinked. That's what they'd called Adrian's strays. "Well, they've actually already been found," I said cautiously. "Look at Williams—does he seem odd to you?"

Marcus glanced at Chris, then blinked, and I watched his vampire come out. His eyes started to glow faintly red, and his nostrils flared to the point of changing the structure of his nose to something sharper and more predatory. His jawline extended—not fully, but enough for his fangs to emerge.

"He's not..." Marcus' voice had changed with his face, and it sounded rough and growl-ly. "He's *faded* around the edges. And..." And now that inhumanly altered nose wrinkled, which looked *really* strange. "And he *smells*..." Marcus turned towards me. "You're right. He smells like it...whatever the fuck it was that attacked us the other night—but faint...like the other night we were swimming in it, and now it's twenty-miles away upwind."

I nodded. "His girl says it's like a sound...Nicky, do you hear it?"

Nicky nodded, his chin digging a little into my shoulder in a way that was intimate and not at all unpleasant. "When you put it that way...the other day at school I did hear something...sort of like road construction on speed...and then you keeled over and I forgot all about it."

"So the vamps and I smell it, the weres hear it...when you get back see if Bracken or the other sidhe have any sort of sensory reaction to him...and then find a way to keep him the fuck away from the rest of the household." I turned my head to see Chris Williams hanging onto Ellen Beth, weeping helplessly and swearing viciously as he clung to her, nearly dragging her down. "This is bad, Marcus. Anything that can addict a were creature and send vampires to their knees...this is a serious threat and we need to isolate it from the rest of the hill."

Marcus nodded. "We've got a couple of rooms where we put newborn vamps—steel reinforced, they're practically safes with little tiny airholes for the weres who volunteer to be dinner. They're pretty comfy—we'll put him up there."

"Give his girl the option of staying with him or rooming somewhere else nearby, and brief someone who's up in the day..."

"Duh. Arturo and Bracken will know everything..." Marcus smiled reassuringly and patted the shoulder that Nicky wasn't digging his chin into, then he gestured to the other vampires. In a movement too fast to even follow with the eye, one of them grabbed Williams, one grabbed Ellen Beth, and the three of them leapt into the air in a bound of tautly fluttering black trench coat.

"We all love Nicky," Marcus said before he took his own bound into the air. "You keep him alive, we'll do our part." And then he was gone and Nicky and I were alone under the brittle cold night sky.

The throb of the music reached us from the club and Nicky wrapped his arms around me and we moved together, dancing silently in the still purple night. It was not a slow song—it was pulsing and visceral: raw music. Nicky rocked back a little onto his haunches, and pulled me into the cradle of his hips until I could feel the ridge of his erection nestling in the cleft of my ass. I startled, pushing myself forward, but his hands wrapped securely around my waist and pulled me back against him.

"Shhhh..." he whispered in my ear, a sensation that always made my panties flood. I'd thought that it was because it was Adrian or Green or Bracken doing the whispering and I was almost disappointed to find out that it was the nerve endings in my ear, and not the man. "Shhh," Nicky said again, rubbing his hands on my arms and down around my waist again, his warmth seeping into my bones. Were-creatures always ran supernaturally warm, and right now Nicky's light-speed metabolism was the only thing keeping my teeth from chattering. I relaxed just a little, the soft flesh of my now skinny bottom easing against him.

"It's okay," he murmured again. "We're supposed to."

We're supposed to. We were supposed to make love. Everybody knew we were supposed to make love. Bracken had given me his shawl and his blessing. Green had taken me on a walking tour of Nicky's body, and had loved Nicky himself. And Nicky had been nothing if not my fellow student, my helper, and my friend. And he was warm and the music was moving my body, and it was time that I took my lover to bed.

I leaned fully against him, and could feel him between my legs, separated only by the fabric of his clothing. A sound ripped out of his throat, a groan that

had nothing to do with pain, and everything to do with the fact that I could feel the head of his phallus, the little ridge that bordered it, rubbing at the cleft of my bottom.

I took Nicky's two hands in my own and lowered them down to the hem of my skirt and the tights on my thighs beneath, and raised them, palms down, up my thighs, slowly. His hands took over of their own volition, following a course up under my skirt until it was rucked up to my hips, and his warm, warm hands found their way to my stomach and under the elastic of the tights. My own hands reached behind me and found purchase on his hips as he smoothed his way down my stomach. My stomach clenched in reaction, and the tights were rolled down my narrow little hips, puddling at my feet and my fuck-me shoes. With squirmy little movements I toed off my shoes, the motion bringing my now bare body up against Nicky's groin.

He groaned again, a raw, tearing sound, and I reached behind me and loosened his belt, listening for the buckle to hit the ground as it dragged his pants with it. Nicky, following the example of every preternatural man I've ever known, wasn't wearing any underwear. And now neither was I. The music throbbed, it beat, and Nicky's hands pulled me back into the cradle of his hips again, and this time, his cock slid into me as though it belonged there, and every nerve ending in my body sang. His hands came up in front of me, moving under my bra and palming my pointed little boobs. Rough fingers tweaked my nipples and now my throat issued the shredded sound. *Oh God*, it felt good.

Suddenly, my brain was full of sex words, the words Green and I didn't use, the words Bracken and I used for play because what we did in bed was so much larger than they were. *Fuck me, Nicky, fuck me...hard... fuck me with your cock, dammit. Oh, Goooooooddddddessss, that feels...*

And then his fingers, regular sized, slightly rough, nimble clever fingers, found my clitoris (another sex word, blessed, blessed word to give voice to this human feeling of cock in my womb...of fingers pressing hard on my bundle of nerves, of exploding electricity shivering in my channel, along my skin, along the hair at the nape of my neck standing on end...)

"Oh God, Nicky, I'm going to come..." They were my words, rent out in puffs of breath into the chill night air, and then I was undone, shattering into fragments of sheltering stars.

Suddenly Nicky was no longer inside of me, and there was a scalding

splash on my lower back underneath my skirt. He hadn't been wearing a condom, I thought wretchedly. I had forgotten that he could get me pregnant. I leant forward, hands on my knees, bottom poking in the air, gasping for breath, and tried not to cry. We had done it, it had felt wonderful—so good in fact that I had forgotten my promise to Green, to Bracken, never spoken but made in my heart nonetheless, to have their children first.

But Nicky was pulling up my tights and my panties, both of which stuck wetly to my back, but neither of us had a towel, and I would not use Bracken's precious shawl to wipe the come off my skin. Then he was pulling down my skirt and I straightened to let him. He moved away from me for a moment on a blast of frigid air, and I heard the subtle sounds of a man doing up his pants and fastening his belt.

Nicky's arms were back around me again, and his hand, suddenly forceful, when Nicky wasn't usually forceful, grasped my chin and turned my head sideways. He placed a kiss then, a benediction on my lips, and I realized that for all that we had consummated our binding, we had never kissed.

He had been so sweet, and passionate, and everything a lover should be. I closed my eyes on the thought of Green and Bracken, and how I'd almost broken faith with both of them, on the promise of raw human passion with a man I was obligated to love, and kissed Nicky purely, filtering the taint of what I felt behind my eyes, so that he could enjoy his moment, his first best moment with a woman. I kissed him back, turning my body into his embrace, and the kiss deepened, became passionate, and ended, the two of us holding each other and dancing again, this time warmly, sweetly, in the cold moonlight.

I don't remember the ride home, if we talked or not. I remember that Nicky escorted me up to my room with a chivalry and gallantry that made me smile, and he gave me another sweet kiss, his tongue barely brushing mine, then retreating for a chaste peck on the lips.

"Thanks Nicky," I said softly. "It was a lovely evening."

"Any time, pretty lady." He smiled back. I held up a hand to touch his face, and leaned forward to rub his cheek with my own.

"Until next month, Nicky."

I turned away then, so I wouldn't have to see the unspeakable sadness

cross his pretty face with its pert little nose and little boy's freckles.

Soundlessly I slid into my bedroom and tiptoed past Bracken, sprawled fully clothed and on his back, on our bed. He did say he'd wait up, I thought with a weary, tiny smile.

Carefully I hung my shawl in the closet, then, not so carefully, I stripped down, wadding up my other clothes into a little sticky ball and shoved it in the hamper, wishing I had scissors so I could shred them into tatters. Then I went into the bathroom and left the light off, avoided looking at myself in the mirror, turned the water on so hot I could hardly stand it, and stepped under the spray.

BRACKEN

Ghosts in the Garden

She'd been in the bathroom for more than an hour. There were several hot water heaters in Green's hill, but I'm pretty sure none of them would keep warm for that long. I'd woken up when she'd been wadding her clothes into the hamper, and thought that after a quick shower she'd climb into bed with me, but the water had kept running, there in the darkened bathroom, and I knew that something was wrong.

Finally, I stood up and undressed and went into the newly redecorated bathroom.

She was crouched in the shower, her back to the spray, shivering, rubbing a bath sponge over her back and bottom. She must have been doing that for most of the hour, because her back was raw and red, and in another scrub or two I wouldn't be able to touch her because her blood would push through the tiny abrasions of her skin at my call.

The noise I made in my chest was raw with animal aching, and I opened the shower door hard enough to crack the glass, and turned the tap off so violently that the handle twisted off in my hand. She didn't protest at all as I scooped her into my arms dripping wet and wrapped her in a towel. All she did was shiver, and turn her head into my chest without meeting my eyes.

I held her on my lap and dried her hair, then took her into the bedroom and slid one of my plain white T-shirts over her head. She had a drawer full of

nightgowns that Green and I had both bought her, but the only thing she seemed to want to wear in our beds were our T-shirts.

"I'll kill him," I said softly, when she was spooned against me under the quilt.

"It's nothing he did," she replied weakly. Her first words since I found her in the shower.

The darkness closed over us then, but I knew she was awake. There was the subtle scent of mustard flowers in the air, so Green was talking to her. Thank the Goddess—if anyone could help her, Green could.

And then, as if to make me a total liar and fool, Green's voice echoed in my head.

She won't let me comfort her, his voice was aggrieved.

Well fuck. I said back intelligently. If she won't talk to you, we're screwed.

According to Nicky, of all things that was not a problem.

She said it was nothing he did. Even in my mind my expression twisted. Of course she was scrubbing her back raw.

I need to be there. He said, and I ached for him. We all hated to be gone from Green's hill, and Green was the rule rather than the exception.

What have you found out? \ asked.

*The sylph's think it smells like death, it turned five of them into piles of dust, and the entire community lived in fear. Nobody saw its face. Nobody knows its name. Nobody has a **fucking clue**.*

Well, if you're looking for good news on the information front... and I proceeded to brief him on Cory's little run in with the toxic were-creature.

Eventful night. Green murmured thoughtfully, and then I could hear the humor seep back into his voice. And she still managed to take care of Nicky—a bit frightening, our little Goddess, isn't she?

I looked down at her still form, almost positive she was simply lying, still and spiritless, and not sleeping at all. Yes. I agreed simply, and even that little bit of humor left Green's presence in my mind.

I think, he said after some deliberation, that you need to pretend to sleep.

My mind turned into a giant question mark.

She needs to talk to someone, and if it's not you and it's not me, that leaves one person...and you don't admit he exists, and she won't go talk to him if she has to explain herself.

*Erplglack...*I truly had no answer to that. Green was right. Green was right, but I still wasn't going to admit...it didn't matter. He was right. She needed to go to the garden and I needed to swallow my pride and let her go.

Good night. Brother. Green murmured, and then the scent of mustard flowers was gone. I tightened my hold on Cory's midriff for a second, that clenching motion we all make before our body relaxes for the night, and then allowed my breathing to soften, to grow shallow, and my hand to grow limp and heavy on her hip. I worked so hard at pretending to sleep, that by the time she finally slid out of bed, I was truly asleep.

I dreamt of Adrian.

I am four years old, and Adrian is swinging me up over his head in the silvered darkness of the garden. I am taller than human children, but even though this maneuver is awkward, I scream for it over and over again. Adrian is a vampire, and his muscles never tire, and he never complains. He simply laughs, flashing fang, and swings me higher and higher, until I finally fly up towards the tops of the trees, and Adrian levitates up to catch me. We come down in a controlled drop, and I am shrieking with excitement.

'Again! Adrian again!'

But Adrian is catching looks from my mother who is fuckering around with the other pixies and nymphs, visiting, gossiping, watching the children play in the mild gardens in the spring dark. He runs a hand through his virgin lambs-wool hair and shrugs.

"No, mate—your mum'll skin me alive, and even vampires have their limits. "

I sigh. Any other sidhe, and Mom wouldn't care—but a red-cap...well, there was a reason most red-caps are shaped like a pile of rocks. Adrian tousled

my hair, and gave my mom a questioning look. She sighed, and I could hear her voice drift across the garden. "Go ahead, Adrian—if anyone is sure not to drop him, it'll be you. "

And suddenly Adrian's arms are wrapped around my middle so tight I almost can't breathe, but I don't care, because there's a big slice of dark between the silvered green of the lawn and my bare feet, and I can feel the wind through my toes. We are wheeling over the tree tops in what was probably a gentle glide around the garden but to me felt like a roller coaster and a parachute ride both at the same time. I am too stunned to even wave at my mother, but she sees my big eyes as I look at the tops of the trees and study the stream running without reason through the grove, pooling in all of the important places in the gardens.

"Oh, wow..."I breathe. "You do this every night, Adrian? Take me with you...I want to go flying every night forever. "

"That would be lovely, mate. "Adrian laughed in my ear, "But you'll grow up and find better things to do with your time. "

"There's nothing better..." I sighed.

Adrian laughs again, and swoops around the gardens again and again and again, until finally, I fall asleep with the wind in my face and Adrian's gentle laughter in my ear.

It was a memory I was dreaming. It happens sometimes, especially for elves, because our lives are longer than mortals, and sometimes memories are less real than dreams. So in the way of dreams, I was suddenly...

Thirteen years old. I am rangy and strong and by no means fully grown, and I am on fire with perhaps the dumbest idea I've ever had in my life.

My mother has been reading human fairy tales to me—the night before it was about the woman who had a taste of fairy fruit and who had made her husband go and fetch her another taste, and then the two of them had gotten into a world of trouble. It was a metaphor for the sidhes ability to addict mortals with a taste of their sex—my mother was very careful to spell that out. "No kidding, mom," I'd replied with thirteen-year-old arrogance. "It's not like some stupid human is going to go climbing forty foot walls for a lousy peach. "

My mom had ruffled my hair and smiled. "I don't know, Bracken—we don't grow them here, but the peaches in this area are something special." She'd

closed her eyes then and smiled. "Big as your fist, so sweet, you could swear the Goddess herself had lived in the tree..." She came out of her reverie. "There are orchards not twenty miles away." She said after a moment, "But the earth changes up here, and we forget, sometimes how close the most wonderful things can be. "

She had looked so wistful, and I had been difficult lately—defiant, angry, insisting that I have my own room in the hill when Green was already expanding as fast as he possibly could. Keeping the hill temperate and fertile took a great deal of power, and putting more rooms in right now would tax Green to the point where it would be hard to keep us safe. I knew that, but it didn't stop me from whining incessantly. But tonight, I was going to make up for it.

"You're going to what?" Adrian's expression is alarmed and bemused.

"I'm going to drive to Ophir and pick peaches," I say again as though Adrian were deaf. "Can you come with me?"

Today such a request would be no big deal—but when I was thirteen years old Foresthill was a gas station and some cabins, and the road in was mostly dirt, slicing through the sides of the canyon like a razor thin apple peel. The double bridge that stretched across the river now did not exist then—instead there was the terrifying drop down steep roads to the two short bridges at the bottom of the canyon, and after we had crawled our way back up the hill to Auburn, what is now an eight lane highway connected to '49 was then a two lane road nearly as dangerous as the dirt track that would lead us there. And our vehicle was certainly not Arturo's Cadillac.

"I don't know if the panel truck goes more than forty-miles an hour!" Adrian exclaims; he is looking at me with alarm. "Bracken Brine Granite op Crocken, do you even know how to drive?"

Back then, when farm boys were helping their parents by age ten, everybody knew how to drive, but on the sidhe hill, it was a valid question—the panel truck (and, in fact, all vehicles any of us got into) had to be washed in salt water and heavily spelled—even to this day, although Green was careful to wax and buff his fleet of cars after the first salt water wash.

"Yes," I say proudly. "I most certainly do." Green had let me practice, but he had made a point of crafting a halter of triple thick canvas and leather and insisting that I wear it. Where another sidhe could go through the window and

heal in moments, again, my red-cap abilities would make healing slow and painful, with the loss of a lot of my precious blood. But I've been driving the truck for a month, and I am reasonably sure that once I get it out of the gravel drive of Green's hill, the rest will be cake. So I am arrogant about this endeavor—but I want Adrian's help. Besides, Adrian is fun and exciting and my hero worship has grown to intense proportions by the age of thirteen, and I want to prove that I am fun and exciting too.

"Please, Adrian?" I say, allowing some of my wistfulness to creep into my voice. "I really want to do this...and you're the only person who would understand. "And this is true. The ratio of high sidhe to lower sidhe is always very low—all of the children that I have grown up with are lesser fey, and by age thirteen, their biological imperatives are to mate and to fix things and to dust. There is no one my age at the hill who would understand rebellion and redemption, but I know that Adrian does.

Adrian's expression is pained. I have won already, and he knows it. He shakes his head. "You had better drive like the flaming wind, mate, because it's already ten o'clock, and sunrise is at five. July? You have to pick bloody July to go hauling off into the hills for fairy fruit? Why not just make it Litha and sign my death warrant while you're at it!"

But I laugh, because I know that Adrian will never die, and Adrian has already fed from one of his were-kitties (I watched him this night, to my delight and increasing discomfort—would he feed from me someday, I wondered, thrilled) and we both hop into the truck and take off.

It takes us four hours alone to get to the orchard. It would have taken an experienced driver less time, but I had never driven outside of Green's hill, and when I realized the scope of the shattering drop to my side, my knuckles grew white on the steering wheel and my shoulders strained with tension. I could survive that drop, I kept telling myself. My parents made a lot of how it took hours instead of minutes for deep wounds to stop bleeding, but I would still survive. Adrian, being wise and loving me more than I could possibly imagine at the age of thirteen, was judiciously quiet about our creeping pace, outlined by the shaky glare of the giant headlamps at the truck's front. He makes light conversation so the silence does not grow burdensome, and allows me to drive us through the night with what feels like pure will.

When we arrive at the farm, things go much faster—we both move in what

Cory calls hyper speed, but with what we used to call Goddess' grace. It would have taken two humans eight or nine hours to pick enough peaches to fill the back of the panel truck with neat little boxes. It takes Adrian and me three hours. The peach fuzz coats my body and itches, and even my muscles ache a little from the climbing and the stooping and the hauling. However, it is also beautiful, working like bees in the moonlight, talking softly over the sleeping silence of the scented orchard. And when we are done, I look proudly into the back of the truck, and then at the graying sky. And my heart starts to pound in panic.

"Fuck," I say, the swear word coming crudely from my mouth for the first time in my life. I look at Adrian. "Holy Goddess, Adrian—we...you'll never get..." The full import of that gray sky stopped up my throat. Adrian needed to be in dark. Absolute dark, or he would conflagrate spectacularly and die, and I would have killed him with my foolishness and my self absorption.

But Adrian smiles easily. "Don't worry about it mate—we've got a tarp, we've got boxes...we'll make do. "

And so we do. It was hellifically dangerous—and if any vampire I knew today wanted to attempt it I would chew their ears off for even mentioning such a thing, but we were deep into plain-folk territory, and I had no glamour to hide my identity (that usually comes at puberty, and I was a few years short) and even if we could convince some poor human to put Adrian up in their cellar, they would probably have me shot and mounted on their wall before the next sunset. We haul all of the boxes out of the truck in record time, and I cover Adrian in the tarp at the bottom of the truck. I balk at the next part.

"You'll bruise, mate..." I say, foolishly. The sky is already light, and the air has dropped from eighty degrees to sixty five in the last fifteen minutes.

"I don't bruise, Bracken, and I don't breathe," he says briskly, smiling reassuringly from under the tarp. His skin is pale and he looks painfully young. "But I don't have much time, so stack away," he finishes, and then disappears under the thick oilcloth and I have no choice.

So stack I do. We'd picked enough peaches to fill the back of the panel truck, and I stack every last box on top of that helpless lump underneath the tarp. I have packed the first two layers when the actual light from the sun hits me, and my breath fails in my chest for a moment. Holy Goddess holy goddess holy goddess holy goddess...and no fire. No Conflagration. No flaming death for my best friend, and now I can breathe myself. Of course, now I have to drive

back, and breathing becomes optional once more.

I'm surprised I don't hit puberty on the drive back, because it seems to take three years instead of three hours, and when I pull up the gravel to the small wooden building where the truck is kept, the sun is very bright. It is at least nine o'clock in the morning, and the wrongness of having a vampire—of having my vampire—in the back of the truck in this much sunshine makes my hands shake with nausea and fear. Green is waiting for me, and the expression on his face is an indescribable mixture of worry, love, anger, and stark terror.

I slide out of the truck, for once in my life afraid of Green, hoping he will come up with a punishment worse than the ones I have been giving myself on the tortuous drive home.

"Where is he?" Green's voice is tight with anxiety, but he is not advancing, not threatening with his considerable height, and for some reason his self control is so much worse than his spitting anger would be.

"He's in the back of the truck," I say, trying very hard not to cry. "He's under the peach crates and the tarp...he should be fine if we get him into the garage." Green nods and I go to open the wooden doors while Green parks the truck. I hear him inside, giving orders to the sprites, and know that the peaches will end up on our table for many days, and even in the winter they show up in preserves. I can't eat them. Not even in the winter, when they bring sunshine and beauty with them in every taste. Now, more than sixty years later, I can't even eat a peach flavored candy without remembering my own stupidity, my own relentless will and what it almost cost me.

Green comes out of the garage, and I can see the floodgates of his self control shatter, and all of his fear for his beloved comes crashing on my thirteen-year-old head. He seizes me by a shoulder and whirls me around to face him, and I've been holding back tears for the last four hours and now they come flooding out too.

"Goddammit, Bracken Brine Granite op Crocken—do you have any idea what you've done—any idea at all? Adrian has been nothing but good to you in your life—he's loved you like a brother—and you repay him with this? You put his life in danger for... for fruit for Christ's sake..." He is yelling, but it isn't loud enough. He is roaring, but he still loves me in spite of his anger and I am still standing and I don't deserve to be. "BY ALL THAT IS HOLY, WHAT IN THE FUCK WERE YOU THINKING?" And his stark pain, my own remorse, drives

me to my knees before him.

"I'm sorry..." I blubber," he said it would be okay...I wanted peaches for Mom, because I've been such a total shit and..." I'm sobbing, and I can't seem to catch my breath. "And... and... and... Adrian said it was okaaaaaaaaayyyyyyy. ..."

And Green, blessed Green, can see now that I've punished myself more thoroughly than he could think to, and he's gathered me up into his arms as I sob on him like a mewling child instead of the man I thought I'd become. I carry on like this for quite a while, and when I've calmed at last, Green strokes my hair, which is starting to grow long, like the adults in our hill. "Okay, mate," he whispers, and his cheeks are wet too. "I understand—more perhaps than you think. But you've got to know...Adrian...he'd do anything for us, Bracken. He'd kill or die for us...if you asked him to fetch the moon he'd fly until he froze in the atmosphere and plummeted back down to earth and shattered in a million pieces, and his only regret would be that he didn't get the bloody goddamned moon like he promised, do you understand?"

I nodded, safe in the shelter of my leaders arms, and sniffled. I hadn't understood last night, but right now, after living the sweating terror of the last few hours, I figured I knew well enough.

"I bet you do." And now, only now, was there Green's dry humor back in his voice. "It's our job, mate, to make sure Adrian never has to make that choice. Right? You and me, the people here...it's our job to make sure Adrian never has to hurt himself for us, okay?"

"Okay," I say in a shaky little voice that I can barely admit is my own. "Okay, Green, I promise. "

And I kept that promise too, I thought, coming awake for just a moment. I kept that promise until Adrian blindsided us all into breaking it. But I'm not done dreaming yet, and now I'm

Seven years older and standing in Adrian's doorway, listening to Hank Williams pleading to know why someone didn't love him. The song was playing on the curious vinyl disc spinning on the brown contraption Green had brought home. None of the other sidhe had been impressed, but Green and Adrian and most of the vampires had listened to disc after disc, until the music, infectious and holding the promise of a great rolling thunder of sound had called me into

Adrian's room in the darkling.

"You like this one," I say, surprising Adrian as he lay on his back, head on his laced hands, booted feet crossed. The yellow light coming from the electric bulb by his bed makes him look slightly warmer, slightly more human. He is wearing jeans so snug I can measure the bulge at his crotch, just the way the 'bad boys' in the movies do, with a white T-shirt holding snug across the hard and wiry muscles of his chest. He looks up, his autumn sky blue eyes lighting when he sees me. I have been creeping down the stairs from the sidhe quarters to see Adrian since before I could walk. My mother swears that the first time they realized I was a red-cap I had fallen down the staircase in an attempt to see Adrian one hectic evening, and they saw that my blood didn't stop without Green's help.

"Yeah, mate..." Adrian was saying. "Hank Williams, Patti Page, Otis Redding...there's something great building here...I can hear it in my bones. "

"So..." I say, and swallow. I have been sexually active since I was sixteen, and none of my people spare a blink for it. I have enjoyed sidhe, lower fey, were-creatures, and vampires—for reasons I still don't understand they seemed to fall into my bed whether I am paying attention or not. But Adrian, my mate, my friend, my brother...I didn't understand his complete indifference to me. I knew he loved me. For my people, that meant that the sharing of flesh was a given. I had seen him and Green together, and I had seen him with women—even human women, which I did not understand—so I knew it wasn't because he wasn't attracted to men, or that he was monogamous to Green. I couldn't seem to find the center of my hurt, find the reason for his rejection. I had told him, casually, that I'd never bunked a mate before—I meant I'd never made love to a friend before, but Green told me (in bed, as he helped me nurse my broken heart) that Adrian thought I meant I'd never done a man. I didn't disabuse him of this notion—I was that hurt, that I was hoping pity would get me where I thought love should have gotten me already.

Adrian is looking at me now, his blue sky eyes suddenly sharp and soft with compassion at the same time. He swallows, one of the many human gestures he maintains that seems perfectly at home on his marble pale, leanly muscled vampire's body.

"So..." he repeats as though he were making fun of me, but there is no sign of smile on his still face.

"So." I clear my throat, and using Hank William's words ask, "When will you love me, Adrian?" Trying not to beg.

The expressions that cross Adrian's face then make perfect sense to me, the adult dreaming this moment, the man who knows what Adrian endured as a child, and the strength that he must have had to still love anyone—Green, me, Cory, anyone. To the young man I was, it only left me confused.

"I've always loved you, Bracken Brine," he says gently. "But I'm not wired like you, right? I grew up human..." His face twists then in a way that takes my breath away even as I dream it. Pain. That expression was pure pain, and I had been too callow to know. "It takes me a while to wrap my brain around the idea that you're not the little nightmare that used to make me take him flying until my arms 'bout fell off," he finishes. But he isn't telling me no, and so I take another step into his room.

"Is your brain wrapped yet, Adrian?" I ask shortly, suddenly wanting him with a force that makes my mouth dry and my palms sweat. I didn't know then that it was because I loved him. It is not the same way that I now love Cory, it is not the same way I have always loved Green, but it was love and it was powerful, and at this moment in my youth it had me by the throat with fear and wanting in a way I had never known and have never known since.

In the dream, a grin crosses Adrian's features, a soft expression I have only seen on his face when he is looking at Green, but now it is aimed at me. If my mouth was dry before, it is the fucking Sahara now, and I'm embarrassingly hard under my tight jeans. My mother made them for me, just like Adrian's, to fit my more than human dimensions. But they were just as tight as the human jeans, and the head of my cock is suddenly poking up past the low-slung waist band. I am so filled with desire for this, my friend, that I don't even think about shifting and hiding my want. Let him see, I think defiantly, painfully.

"I'm working on it, mate," he says, and he looks at me then, and I can almost see him rearranging his sight, looking at me not as a child or as a friend, but taking in the shape of my body, long, muscular, and built with the sensuousness of my people. His gaze brushes my crotch, my body exposed for him, and it touches me almost physically. His look when his eyes reach my face is both arch and hungry. My face is beautiful to humans I know—my parents and Green have frequently warned me as I've become more and more adventurous that I mustn't visit humans until my glamour kicks in or humans will simply strip

naked in front of me and offer themselves as sacrifices. As an adult I know that they were partially kidding—joking in hyperbole to make me aware of the frightening power of the sidhe. But in this moment, as beautiful as I know I am to humans, I am suddenly, achingly awaiting confirmation from Adrian that I am lovely to him. Adrian has lived with us for a mortal lifetime at least—he won't be awed simply because I am sidhe, he will think I am truly beautiful. When I look at him my breath catches in my throat with the possibilities of his beauty, and I want him to look at me in the same way.

He stands, suddenly, and I realize that he is shorter than me now by several inches. He has always been larger than life, but now he is not only slightly taller than the average human, he is also looking...

Scared. Adrian is afraid of something.

"You've grown up strong and lovely, mate," he says now, and his voice is creaky and tight. "But..." He looks away, makes a sudden vague gesture with his hands, runs them through his spider web hair. His features, which are pointed, with a sharp chin and a sharp nose and cheekbones that cast shadows on his cheeks, are now drawn tight almost to the point of his feeding face. "You people...I am not your one and only, Bracken. If you move on to another girl or another bloke and...never visit my room again to play chess or listen to music with me or haul me off on another goddamned quest for something stupid like moonlight for the lower fey bathroom or something..." He looks up at me and I am amazed and devastated at the trickle of crimson that is running down the side of his nose. "It would kill me, mate. It would downright destroy me. You've got to promise me that when you or I move on that we will still be brothers."

I take a step inside his room, and I can hear my heart pounding in my throat as I reach behind me and close the door. Another step, and I am there, in front of him and I reach over to his face and trace the trickle of a tear with my finger and bring it to my lips. I am a red-cap—blood is my calling and my passion—and his tears are as sweet as nectar and honey. I reach out again, and this time I cup his slender, cool cheek in my large palm—and now I am his protector and the world has flip-flopped on its axis.

In a skin tingling rush, I understand what Green was trying to tell me after I brought his beloved home, covered in a tarp and wooden crates of peaches. Suddenly, I understand truly, in my core and my body and soul, Green's frantic need to protect Adrian from himself. Suddenly, I feel, with a pressure that makes

my lungs expand tight in my chest, Adrian's desperate, painful, devouring need to be needed. My mentor, my brother, my hero, Oh, Goddess, Adrian, you never knew how badly we needed you. You never understood how desperately you were loved.

"You couldn't get rid of me, brother," I say gently in my dream, and the relief shining from his eyes makes me want to wrap my arms around him and protect him from anything that might ever hurt him. Oh Adrian, my brother, my lover, my hero—how could I leave you behind?

I'm awake suddenly, just as, in the dream, our mouths met and tangled in a kiss of such sweetness that I have never been able to give it a name. I realize first that Adrian has left me behind instead and second, that I hear his voice and Cory's down the granite staircase. Cory has gone to the garden for a visit, and has left the trap door open. I am suddenly filled with anger and fear and a denial so sharp its bitterness cancels out the sweetness of the remembered kiss. Adrian is dead, I tell myself. His voice is an illusion, forced on me by my memories and my grief. *Then who is Cory talking to?* I ask. And then I refuse to answer.

The granite staircase to the top of Green's hill starts in the hallway from the main sitting room to the darkling. By a trick of sound, voices up in the garden seem to resound in Cory's room and in Green's room and nowhere else in the vast house—or at least that's what I told myself. I was on the verge of charging up the staircase to get Cory out of the cold when I hear her voice, and I find myself arrested on the first step, waiting to see what upset her so badly that she couldn't even talk to Green about it.

She laughed, a tired, gentle sound in the night. And then a question, in that other voice, the one that can't possibly be. "No—it doesn't make me sad," she protests. "It's just that...you, Bracken, Green—it was like a big secret club and I can't believe you all let me in." Her voice dropped. "It's an honor that I dream not of," she quoted, and I can see in my mind that little half smile that she usually gives when she uses poetry, hers or someone else's.

A question. My question. And because it is mine, I actually hear his voice in my head. "So, luv, what really brings you up here tonight? Isn't it date night?"

"Oh gees, Adrian, not you too...does everybody know about date night?"

"Think of it like high school, luv. They all know about date night. They all know when you and Bracken are fighting. They all know when you and Green

are making love. I'm pretty sure that by tomorrow, everyone will know you had to come up to the garden to talk to a ghost in the moonlight." The voice dropped with conspiracy and compassion. "But only you and I will know why."

"I miss you, beloved," she murmured. "Isn't that a good enough reason?"

"No," came the honest answer. "I know you miss me, but you're here now because you don't want to talk to the people who are there for you in ways I can't be." I felt a moment of stark compassion. How hard to be forced to be an observer in the life you had once vibrantly participated in. *She's not talking to anybody.*

"Bracken and Green are too good for me," Cory all but whispered, and I wanted to rocket up the staircase and take her in my arms and make her take that back.

"Bullshit," came the stark reply. Goddess bless...nobody. "That's the sort of crap you believed about yourself when I first met you...you remember that? It took me four months to convince you I was serious...that's four months..."

Her voice broke as she finished the sentence for him. "That we could have had together and didn't." A deep, shuddery breath. "And that's a cruel truth, beloved."

"Not any more cruel than what you are doing to yourself now." Adri...the answer came softly, and until I had to silence my own breath I didn't realize that I was weeping. "Corinne Carol Anne Kirkpatrick op Crocken Green, even a vampire's ghost must be gone by dawn...what is eating a hole in your heart? Was date night so bad, was it so horrible to suffer his touch..."

"No." She swallowed. Even down the staircase I could picture her face, the tight jaw, the determination not to cry. "It was great. It was fun, and when he touched me it was..."

"Nice?"

"Wonderful," she murmured, and a horrible rock settled in my stomach.

"And that's bad?" I wanted to ask the question myself, I thought irritably, and be the bigger man about her binding to Nicky Kestrel.

"The touching felt good...and...I...I..." Goddess. I could even hear her

blush. "You know, A'—that thing you're supposed to do when you're...doing the thing we were supposed to be doing."

"Where I come from we call that a climax." I found myself breathing through my nose, and suppressed the laughter. If he couldn't be there in the garden, he certainly couldn't have that same inflection, that same sense of goddamned humor...

"That's funny, we American's call it an orgasm," Cory retorted archly. "And yes, I had one. And it felt great. But it didn't feel right. You, Green, Bracken—I know what making love feels like...there's a sacredness...a holy dark, moving through your body, and everything, your skin, the sky, your lover's eyes, it's special and amazing and beautiful, and this was...it was sex words and nerve endings and...fucking." She spat the word, with venom and self-loathing, and again I was stunned still. Cory was a master at that word, and I was surprised to hear her mastered by it.

"It was lust!" Ad...the voice sounded older, compassionate, wiser than I remem...than it should have. How would I not know about that wisdom? Where was I when he grew wise? "Your problem, beloved, is that you fell in real, true love with every lover you've had until this moment. If you'd been the average kid, you would have gotten your first bang in the back of a car at fifteen, and it would have taken you another ten years to figure out what real love feels like compared to the sheer joy of getting laid. You got laid. You liked it. That's not a sin, that's a blessing!"

And as wise as it was, and as much as I would have wished I had said the same thing, it only made her cry. "But...but... I forgot the goddamned condom, and I could have gotten pregnant for...for...*fucking*. I promised...myself, anyway, that if I was going to get knocked up it would be Green, and Bracken, and not Nicky. Not first. That's the least I can give them, you know?"

And I couldn't stand to hover at the foot of that staircase anymore. "I don't care." I crashed up the stairs, bellowing at the top of my lungs. "I don't fucking care...a baby is a joy and you don't get to crucify yourself because just once you acted like a twenty-year old human girl instead of a two-hundred year old sidhe princess...for Goddess' sake, get pregnant, have a goddamned flock of birds, but don't hurt yourself for being human."

She looked up in surprise from her huddle on the granite bench Green had erected as Adrian's memorial. Pale ankles peered out from under my T-shirt

which went past her knees and thin wrists were lost in a giant denim jacket I had worn twenty years ago. She was staring at the far end of the bench where...I would not see where. He had left us. He had left *me* behind, after all I had done not to do the same to him, and he was not sitting at the far end of that bench, a pale hand on our beloved's ankle, moonlight hair fluttering in the slight breeze that Green allowed to pass into this consecrated place.

In an effort not to see, I allowed myself to look around the grove. The trees here were flourishing—the rainfall had been unusually heavy this year, and Green's power didn't need to do much to make the erotic dance of trees lush and rich with leaves. I saw the figures of the three of them, Cory, Adrian, and Green in the lovers' dance they'd done the night Cory's power had erupted, creating this place. The original Goddess' Grove was a quiet little meeting of trees down in the garden, but after this place was created, everyone but Green, Cory and I forgot about that one. A stray memory, of the morning after the three of them had spent together crossed my mind—Cory looking at me and Arturo in panic, knowing that now we knew what she'd been doing with her two lovers, a very human fear of judgment for something that had been beautiful, but not human.

"You know how to make an entrance, beloved," Cory said dryly into the sudden silence.

"Am I your beloved?" I asked tightly, meeting her eyes.

Her shock and hurt made me feel worse than I already did. "Of course you are," she whispered. "How could you even ask?"

"Because you're out here talking to nobody instead of in our room, talking to me!"

Her mouth opened, and I saw her eyes making pained contact with...with thin air. She must not have liked what she saw there, because her mouth thinned, and her eyes grew obstinate.

"You've been everything that is lovely to me in the last two days, Bracken Brine, please don't screw it up now by being an ass...no..." When I would have objected, "Go on down the stairs, I'll be down in a minute, I promise." I was going to press it...I was going to insist, but her face softened for a moment, and she reached out, forcing me to move closer to her to take her hand. She pulled it to her mouth and kissed it, her lips soft, and a trace of wetness chilling my palm. I put my palm to her cheek, and felt the tears still there that I had heard break in

her voice, and I could refuse her nothing.

"I won't be long," she murmured, and I nodded and turned away before I could test my resolve, and look for a reaction at the other end of the bench.

As I walked towards the open trap door, the other voice said, "He's still so angry at me." And the hurt in the whisper that couldn't be almost drove me to my knees.

Before I could stumble down the stairs, Cory replied softly, "We all were, beloved. I had you for a heartbeat, and my anger almost killed me. He had you since he was a baby—he's, like, existentially pissed off..."

The world quirked. "I know...I know...but I never miss him so much as when he's right there in front of me..." It was the last thing I heard before I absolutely had to get the fuck out of Adrian's garden. I tripped on the way down...*I* tripped. I'm a sidhe, we have eyes in our feet and the Goddess moves with us—the sound of my knees hitting the floor at the foot of the stairs almost surprised me as much as the pain. But neither of them surprised me as much as Cory's sudden hand on my elbow as I crouched there, dazed and hurting in ways that had nothing to do with my smarting knees and palms.

She helped me to my feet silently, then crouched there on the floor and checked my knees for blood. There was a little, but not enough for my calling, and she kissed the scrapes gently, even as they healed under her lips. I put my hand down to help her up, but she stayed there for a moment, her hazel eyes gleaming in the light from the living room window.

"I only wish your heart healed this quickly," she said softly, and she took my hand even as it started to shake. I had no words to answer her—she stood up and touched my face, and her hands shook as well. "He'll be there when you're ready," she murmured. "No, no...don't answer...just kiss me beloved. Just kiss me, and we can heal each other..."

And I couldn't get enough of her...her taste, her mouth on mine, her hands on my skin. We moved to our room, and fell to the bed and I forgot my size and I forgot my strength and lost myself inside her, in her arms, in her body, forgetting even that tonight was date night, and that tonight of all nights she was less wholly mine than most nights. I forgot everything, but that she was my beloved, and she would heal my heart if she could.

Afterwards, she lay quietly, passed her hands over my face, and didn't comment on my wet cheeks.

"I was right," she murmured, obviously exhausted. "There is a holy dark, beloved, coursing through our bodies, bones, and blood." Poetry—she was so tired her poetry leaked through.

Her breathing evened, and she was well and truly sleeping, and before I knew it so was I.

The Goddess, blight her, cursed me with one last dream. I never kept track of human years as they passed—Adrian and I were exclusive to each other for a short time (with the exception of Green, of course—always, always, Adrian and Green, their love set the rhythm of the sun and moon). Adrian once told me it was nine years together all told, and it seemed like a big number for a short time. All I remember was...

Elvis is asking me if I'm lonesome tonight from a juke box that spills into the summer air. Adrian and I are checking out a bar in town because the were-creatures hang out there. Their population has been growing slowly, with that of the vampires, and Adrian likes to make sure the lost ones that end up in his keeping feel found after all is said and done. We have fought, often, for the last few months. We don't fight like a bickering couple—we beat the hell out of each other, and then laugh about whatever the hell we were thinking about before we do. But we are still fighting, and there is a restlessness in both of us that we won't voice.

A human girl comes out of the club, and I check my glamour twice—it kicked in shortly after Adrian and I came to be, and Green and the other sidhe have drilled me on it constantly ever since.

The girl looks at me and I see that she is uncommonly pretty—blonde hair, caught up in a pony tail, one of those full skirts and a button up shirt with round sleeves and a round collar. A little of my glamour drops, and she turns to me with an "ooohhh..." Her expression is besotted, and I find that I don't mind so much when a pretty human girl looks at me like that. Adrian touches my shoulder and murmurs "Watch yourself, mate." And suddenly I'm about two seconds from planting my fist in his face. I turn to him with a snarl, and it's there in his eyes. The reason we've been fighting, the reason I've been pushing him to take me out on the town.

My world comes crashing down in a heartbeat—oh Goddess, I'm going to have to leave Adrian behind. The bleakness I feel at that moment is enough for me to turn away from the pretty human girl, with all that promise of ripeness and beauty at my beck and call.

Suddenly Adrian smiles, part of his mouth quirking up, and I recognize the look— it's the look he gives me when he's daring me to catch him, the look he gives me when he's going to fly past a mortal naked to make a clean dive from the sky into Lake Clementine. It's the look he gives me when he dares me not to come. And he turns that smile up a watt, then turns it to the pretty human, who is looking at both of us in awe, too naive to recognize the look or the touch on the shoulder for what they are.

"Ello, luv," he says, cranking up the British in his accent and the charm in his grin. I return his look, his smile, the glint in his eyes, and get back to the girl. She looks like she's about to melt into a puddle, and the game is on.

I get home the next evening, and meet the pretty nymph coming out of Adrian's room. Adrian and I look at each other evenly for a minute, then he cracks a grin. "Have a good one, mate?"

"Absolutely, brother," I return, at a loss for anything more profound.

"Good," he says with a challenge, "Because the next one's mine. "

"You wish!" I put as much bravado into my voice as I can, and pray this moment won't lapse into awkwardness.

"So—swimming in Lake Clementine tonight? Lots of birds there?" The thought was tempting, and I let it show on my face.

"I'm more in for a game of chess," I reply, knowing that's what he wants.

He smiles and sets up the chess board on his bed.

I remembered the rest of the night in my dream. I beat him three games out of five.

CORY

Running

My feet made a rhythmic thud on the rubber track, and I tried with all my might to move like my body didn't hurt.

Bracken forgot himself last night. He's never forgotten his strength, ever. He took my body with enough force to push himself inside of me, cock first, and I tried and I tried and I tried to wrap myself around him and to make it feel all better but I couldn't. The results today were sore thigh muscles, and, well, soreness higher than that, and it was only one part of my misery as I tried my first run under a threatening gray sky.

My breath wheezed in my chest and my throat felt like broken glass and I realized my feet were going faster than my healing body could manage. My breath labored even louder than the sound of *The Killers* cranking from my iPod—my Christmas gift from Nicky and Renny—and after three laps around the track I grudgingly slowed to a walk. How embarrassing—I mean, three quarters of a mile? There was a big woman out here—I mean, really big, with brown-red hair and a friendly smile—and I'm pretty sure she just lapped me at a brisk walk—on her fifth lap. I gulped air like it was on sale, and suddenly heard a thud-thud behind me. A girl about my age, with dark glossy hair in a ponytail pulled up next to me and slowed to a walk too.

"It's too cold to be running anyway," she said on a disgustingly even breath, and I could tell she was trying to make me feel better. Bracken glared at me broodingly from across the track, thinking seriously about hauling me away to the gym shower and carrying me around the school for the rest of the day, and Renny and Nicky were reading on the bleachers next to him. Suddenly a pleasant face and a word of encouragement are the sweetest things life had to offer.

"That's..." (wheeze) "nice" (wheeze) "of (gasp) "you." I was going to finish up with 'to say' but she laughed and spared me the trouble.

"Here...keep moving, but slower," she advised, and slowed her walking pace. "First day out on the track?"

I nodded, feeling like a total fool.

"Yeah—it's hard...that first lap you think 'I rock, I'm a god, I can do it'...and by that third? You're thinking 'I suck, I'm a dork, I'm gonna die.' Been

there...you just gotta keep coming out." She nodded enthusiastically, and her ponytail bobbed. Her face was a perfect oval with a little piquant point of a chin and a turned up nose. I remember hating cheerleaders in high school for being so perky, but here, on this dismal track with the waving oak trees beckoning from over by the parking lot and the elephant sized clouds scudding under the sky, I was thinking maybe cheerleaders were underrated heroes.

"I was sick this winter." Oh good, I can talk now—I'm not a total mutant.

The girl nodded earnestly. "That'll do it—I had bronchitis last year—it took me weeks to build back up to where I was...what got you?"

A giant flying bird—whom I was now married to, his giant sadistic bird leader—who was now an idiot washing dishes in a hotel I made out of sex and desperation, gut wrenching worry over Bracken—hence the hotel, sheer exhaustion and a healthy dose of grief "It was kind of a bunch of stuff," I said. We weren't really 'walking' now—we were more meandering down the last stretch of the track. "I ended up in a coma for a week. When I came to I had the body tone of overcooked asparagus."

The girl's eyes got really big. "Wow—that's serious sick," she breathed. "Are you sure you're supposed to even be out running?"

I turned to her in a panic. "Shhhhhh..." I hushed totally serious. "If Bracken hears you he won't let me out of the freaking hill for a year!"

Pretty ponytail looked the two hundred yards to where Bracken was watching me quizzically. Elvish senses are sharper even than vampires, and he had, indeed, heard me say his name.

"That totally hot guy?" she asked. "I mean, my boyfriend is totally hot too, but this guy—he's like, more beautiful than should be allowed by law. Is he your boyfriend?"

"Husband," I corrected, smiling slightly because, in spite of its accidental origins, Bracken's bonding with me was still a source of quiet pride.

"Where's your ring?" she asked, and I looked at my hand in surprise yet again. You'd think I'd just remember to ask Bracken for a hunk of metal for my finger, right?

"We haven't found one we liked." Dammit, it wasn't a lie...we just hadn't

gone looking for one yet. "The ceremony was very private." *That*, at least was true—the ceremony had been the two of us in bed, screaming out each other's full names. Of course, we shorted out every light bulb for a two block radius with the power of the binding, but only the other people in the apartment know how it happened.

"But you're really married?" She was positively goggle eyed. "I mean...you're both so young!"

"He's actually a lot older than me," I said dryly. Like seventy years or so.

"Well he's totally hot—why isn't he out here with you?"

"He works out in the morning." In the morning he went walking Green's hill, all bazillion acres of it—it took him about half an hour.

Ponytail nodded like this made total sense, and I thanked God for the total weirdness of human men. I looked up at Bracken and the others—Renny waved as we neared. I'd gone four laps—but I'd walked the last one, and I looked uncertainly at my new friend, who seemed to know more about this whole exercise thing than I did.

"Yeah—a mile's good the first time," she said encouragingly. "Are you going to be out here again?"

"Monday through Thursday, same time same place," I returned easily. "I'm Cory, by the way."

"Well you'll see me here!" She sounded excited about the possibility and I almost looked around to see who she was talking to. "I'm Davis Stacia Kelly—but everybody calls me Davy."

I blinked a couple of times. "And you just tell people that?" I asked before I could stop myself. Even before I'd met Arturo and Adrian I'd been guarded about my name. It was...it was a part of me and I wasn't sure if I wanted the world to have free access to all parts of me.

"I know—my boyfriend keeps telling me that I shouldn't because of identity theft or something, but all my credit cards are daddy's, and he's got about a gazillion fail-safes on our money anyway."

I had to smile. She was very unselfconscious about daddy's money. Where

the people in my hometown used to irritate the hell out of me when they talked about their hot cars and vacationing in Europe and getting their ins to Princeton, Davy had a sort of innocence—she knew she had the money, but it apparently didn't make her better than anybody else.

"It's more of a privacy thing, I guess," I returned guardedly. "But it's good to meet you, Davy. See you tomorrow? Maybe I can actually go a whole mile by then."

"Oh no," she returned seriously. "I mean, definitely, I'll see you tomorrow, but you're going to want to stick to what you're doing for at least a week! See you tomorrow!" And with that she waved and trotted off to finish her run.

"Who was that?" Renny wanted to know.

"Someone who's not above sweating," I shot back. "Her name's Davy if you want to run with us."

Renny measured Davy judiciously from across the track, as though assessing a threat. "If you teach her to knit, I'll rip out her lungs," she said after a moment.

I laughed. "Renny cat, you're the only girlfriend wild enough to knit with me."

Renny made a sound something like a purr, and I gave Bracken a sweaty peck on the cheek. "I'm going to shower—meet you at human sexuality."

"Where six people who aren't remotely human are going to learn the basics of something most of them learned at the hands of a sexual god in the first place," Nicky said dryly.

"I'm human," I said defensively and watched Nicky's eyebrows rise. "Partly!" I added, and danced away happy, forgetting for a moment that I was sore, afraid, and confused.

A half-an-hour later I was not so happy, and the soreness in the unmentionables was back again, added to the muscle stiffness from my pathetic little trot around the track. And the questionnaire in front of me was giving me fits.

The professor hadn't come in yet—we sat in one of the lecture halls that

sometimes doubled as a theatre in the psych building, and the TA—whom I suspected of being a sylph, she (?) had been so genderless—had passed out the questionnaires and told us that Professor Hallow would be in momentarily, then disappeared. It had all seemed mellow and groovy until I got a good look at the questionnaire.

ANSWER ALL QUESTIONS HONESTLY. ANSWERS WILL BE READ OUT LOUD, ANONYMOUSLY IN CLASS. IF YOU DON'T WANT AN ANSWER READ, THE REGISTRAR'S BUILDING IS IN THE NORTHWEST CORNER OF THE CAMPUS. FEEL FREE TO DROP.

Cute. Clever. And I was soooooooo NOT answering these questions honestly.

Question 1: How long have you been sexually active? Answer? About seven months.

Question 2: How many partners have you had in that time? And here's where it got tricky, because the answer was about four, almost five (if I counted a very sexy vampire who had gracefully bowed out so as not to make things difficult between Bracken and me) and even I knew that was too many lovers to have started so late in the game. I wrote down "three" hoping that only the ones I'd chosen for myself would count.

Question 3: Have you ever had multi-partner sex? Answer? Well, yes. But it may have officially fit the bill as "multi-partner sex" however, emotionally it had felt more like "lovemaking cubed" so that's what I put.

Question 4: Have you ever had sex when you didn't want to? Why? Well, because Nicky would die of neglect if I didn't, and it wasn't really either of our faults that we were stuck together like this and he was my friend and I didn't want him to die. I guess it wasn't really against my will, right? I just wrote "No."

Question 5: What's the most unusual place you've ever had sex? Oh brother. In Green's garden, in full view of Green and every other member of his court? Right—like I was going to put that. Or how about in a nasty skeezy warehouse that was transformed by my sexually induced power into a five star hotel? I sighed and wrote "under the stars."

Question 6: Has sex ever been painful for you? Well yeah—when your beloved is the size of some sort of gag gift from an adult toy store only much

much bigger, and harder, and, well, superhumanly powered and his heart is so broken you'd let him fuck you to a pulp just to ease the pain, it tends to inflict a few bruises. I wrote "Love has always been more painful than sex." And liked it so much I underlined it twice before I moved on.

But there were thirty questions, just like that, and for every answer I wrote down on paper there was another, less human answer in my heart. I glanced over at Mario and La Mark who were behind us, and noted sourly that they seemed to be doing just fine. Of course—Mario was still grieving for his one and only mate, and La Mark hadn't bonded with anyone yet. Green was still trying to figure out a way for the non-hetero Avians to bond in a three way attachment with sylphs so that the sylphs could bear the Avian children and allow the Avians to live. They didn't have much to write.

But a glance at Renny, Nicky, and Bracken was another matter altogether. I wondered if I looked as uncomfortable as they did, and figured I must. Bracken caught my eye and we both exchanged a moment of profound unhappiness. Elves couldn't lie, I knew, not even on paper, and I wondered how he'd managed to dodge some of those trickier questions—like how long he'd been sexually active (over fifty years) or how many lovers he'd had (like he'd kept track!) or what kind of birth control he liked to use (mostly force of will).

"Green has a lot to answer for," he said grimly, and as much as I wanted to defend my beloved I stared at the mess of half-truths and creative thinking in front of me and had to agree.

The TA collected our questionnaires and the professor came in, a tall, aesthetic looking man, who smiled politely at the TA and then stood at the podium and started talking about sexual mores and expectations in America.

"Most of our expectations are based on fiction and media, and not on reality—it's like there are two sex worlds out there—the fantasy we can never have, and the funny, odd, very physical human reality we're stuck with." There was some brief laughter, and he continued. "And that is why the questionnaire—it is easier for us to see how truly off base our expectations are when compared to the experiences of living, breathing people we can relate with on a human level."

It was about the fifth time he'd said the word human, and I got a sudden buzz on my nerve endings. I called up a little bit of power and...

"Holy shit," I murmured, and I saw Bracken rubbing the bridge of his nose next to me. Renny and Nicky straightened in their chairs and leaned forward for a closer look, and Mario made a surprised hum in the back of his throat.

In reality, he wasn't aesthetic looking at all—he was stunning, an elf-god of about seven and a half feet, with pale-white hair and blazing blue eyes. And he was leafing through our questionnaires with mild puzzlement in his face. He read the answers to a few out loud with no incident—when were you first sexually active? Twelve—with the babysitter, (surprised laughter) Have you ever had multi-partner sex? Only if my vibrator counts, (more laughter) What's the strangest place you've ever had sex? A Volkswagen Beetle. (A lot of pained grimaces.) And some more in the same vein. And then:

"Have you ever had multi-partner sex? Answer: Well, when...when my boyfriend was teaching me how to make love to my...mate, he kissed me the way he kissed me the first night we made love, and then told me to kiss her that way..." Then he squinted a little, looked up into the audience and grimaced. "Short answer, yes," he interpreted, and I could see Nicky turning bright red out of the corner of my eye. As an Avian, Nicky could lie his ass off, and I'd figured he had—how did details about our night with Green manage to surface on his paper?

Without making a show of it, Professor Hallow moved Nicky's paper to the back of the stack. "Has sex ever been painful for you? Answer: Well when your beloved's the size of a gag gift from an adult toy store..." The class erupted into laughter and my jaw dropped open, but it didn't end there. The professor went on, and the laughter stopped. "Only bigger, and harder, and superhumanly powered and his heart is so broken you'd let him fuck you to a pulp just to ease the pain, it tends to inflict a few bruises." As the laughter died down, and people gasped in sympathy, the professor added, as though driving a point home. "'I've always found that love hurts much more than sex.' And that's the truth boys and girls, isn't it?" There were somber nods, and I tried very hard not to weep with pure mortification.

I turned to Bracken with stricken eyes. "I swear to God I didn't write that."

"You thought it," he said lowly, with a twist to his mouth. "You should have told me."

"There are some things you shouldn't have to live with, Bracken Brine," I snapped, and then shut up because a tear had spilled over and I didn't want more

to follow.

But the agony wasn't over yet. My paper obviously got thrust to the back of the pile, but the next one was Bracken's—as was made obvious by the answer to the question *What's your biggest fear during sex?*

"I'm afraid of hurting my beloved, because she's tiny and fragile and she's been hurt so many times and I am big and clumsy and stupid." And now the class wasn't laughing any more, and I wanted to die, and Bracken wanted to jump in the coffin with me.

"You're not clumsy and stupid," I murmured just loud enough for him to hear, not even daring to look at him.

"I hurt you," he said back, looking straight ahead.

"I let you," I said. He took my hand in his and we sat there blindly through the rest of the class. More answers were read, including one from Renny I was sure because it expressed a concern that a lover was unwilling to turn 'terminally furry' as a lack of commitment in it that the Prof. managed to spin to something else, and then the homework assignment was given and the class filed out.

Bracken and I were on the verge of getting the fuck out of there before any more of our personal life could spill out on the floor like noodles from a box when the Professor called out "Green's children—a moment of your time?"

I closed my eyes and grimaced, but Bracken was the one who said "Fuck." Renny and Nicky both said "Son of a bitch!" And La Mark and Mario sighed.

Reluctantly and counting each breath, we filed back to our seats and sat, regarding our professor with extremely unfriendly eyes. Professor Hallow approached us, looking grim and apologetic at once. He was truly extraordinary to look at, once you got past the glamour, but I wasn't dazzled. This sidhe had just hurt my beloved, and I was angry.

"Did you forget something?" I snapped, "Like the machete in our innards? Did you have some salt you wanted to sprinkle? A rack you forgot to put us on?"

"An apology to make?" he interrupted with a sad smile. "I'm so sorry, to all of you. I put a compulsion on that questionnaire to answer honestly—it saves us all a lot of bullshit at the beginning of the class. What happens with the Goddess' children is that their first answer—the one they make with their hearts—looks to

me to be clearly printed on the page. I had no way of knowing—until I got to a few specific words—that there were things you very much needed to keep private.

It was understandable, but my gaze was still extremely unfriendly. "Didn't Green tell you we were coming?"

A nod, a kindness I didn't deserve. "Yes, little Goddess—he did. But I have four sections of this class—I didn't know when to expect you, and it simply slipped my mind." He surveyed us all, from Mario all the way down to me. "That being said, I hope you don't mind if I intrude some more. I think you all need to talk—to someone objective and understanding—about the burdens in your hearts. That's why Green sent you to me, you know. He is usually the sounding board for his people, but—Cor..." He struggled for a moment not to say the whole of my name—all of the elves did at first, "Cory—lady Cory, you, Bracken, Dominic, and Erin—you're all suffering from terrible burdens—I could tell that from your answers, if not from the defensiveness in your postures, and Green knows that you're not in a position to talk to him as honestly as you might. I'd like to make appointments, if I may, with all of you—I understand you have a break between your classes?"

My face must have twitched, and I could have blessed Green and cursed him at the same time if he'd been there, and my feelings must have been strong because there was a sudden smell of mustard flowers and a gentle *For me, beloved?* In my head, and I nodded reluctantly.

"Fine," I said, feeling ungracious. "Fine. Whatever. What are your office hours?" He told us, and I shrugged. "I'll go first—tomorrow at 12:00, then, before I run. Bracken can see you while I'm running. Nicky and Renny the next day, Mario & La Mark the day after."

"You need to eat," Bracken said unexpectedly, and I shrugged.

"Before I run, after I run...whatever..."

"No, you need to eat—you can't just blow it off, Cory." His jaw set, and I remembered the words 'tiny and fragile' from his answer, and I took another deep breath, but before I could speak, the professor stepped in.

"I'll bring lunch—my sprites have a line on some excellent pizza." And I was so grateful to him for heading off the argument that had nothing to do with

lunch that I looked up and smiled in honest gratitude.

"Thank you—that would be perfect," I said, and was surprised when Hallow extended his hand. I was feeling more kindly towards him than I had been a minute ago, so I took it as though to shake hands and was surprised he brought it to his lips instead.

"Any time, Lady Cory," he said seriously, and I felt a sudden, soft buzzing in my body, and the only thing sexual about it was its location. Otherwise, it was like the stroke of a hand through my hair—pleasant and soothing, but not arousing at all.

I blinked, the soreness left over from the night before suddenly gone. "Thank you again," I said quietly, feeling better about things than I had in a while.

"Again, any time," he murmured, smiling kindly, "I'll see you both tomorrow." and our meeting tomorrow suddenly didn't seem so onerous.

And that was it—he turned to go, and we started filing out, and suddenly I had a thought. "Professor Hallow!" He turned towards me, and I continued. "Has there been anything hinky going on...you know, with...with the Goddess' children? There was something really awful here, about five days ago...and it was up in Auburn too...and Green said it attacked the sylphs in the bay area this fall—I was wondering if you knew anything."

The sidhe's brilliantly blue eyes sharpened—his whole posture sharpened — and I got a shiver of excitement—this was important to him. "Five days ago?" I nodded. A look of profound sorrow passed his ageless, flawless features. "I had a TA named Jon—a were-creature. Not one of Green's, but I was trying to get him to go up and talk to the vampires. We were...close." They'd been lovers. "Five nights ago, I felt him die." He shuddered, and I knew the depth of Green's grief for his lovers, and any lingering resentment I'd held towards Hallow faded. Of course he'd forgotten we were coming to his class—he was just trying to make it through the day without shattering into powdered pain.

"I'm so very sorry," I said, wishing I could do something better than that. "I know..." My heart constricted and my voice trailed off. "We all know how you feel."

He smiled at us, brilliantly, sadly, "I know you do, Lady Cory. Any help I

can give to help you find this...thing...I'll give you gladly..." His voice hitched. "But not today, if that's all right with you."

"Yeah. Yeah, that's fine," I murmured, and then he turned and exited gracefully, whereas the rest of us simply fled the room.

The six of us grouped together for comfort for the rest of the day, but had little to say to each other. It was like we were afraid if we opened our mouths, something else embarrassing and personal would spill out, so we had only a few words about every day things and nothing about our upcoming meeting with Professor Hallow. However, when Green called that afternoon I did let him know, in my own special way, that I didn't appreciate being blindsided like that.

"Better beg forgiveness, luv, than beat you over the head, drag you kicking and screaming, and have to play dirty pool with not just you but all six of you in order to get permission," he'd responded dryly, and I had to laugh. All was suddenly forgiven—just hearing his voice on the phone made my knees melt a little and my lingering resentment evaporate. And he did have a point—if we were reluctant to talk to Green about something, then getting us to be counseled outside of the hill would be a struggle. With my forgiveness came a moment of easy silence, of wanting, of hearing him breathe on the other end of the phone and wishing I could feel his breath on my cheek. The moment grew so painful I knew I had to end it or fall apart. Since I already hurt, that's when I told him about Jon Chase, and Hallow's recent loss.

"I didn't know," Green said softly. "Hallow's always been independent, which is fine, but I wish he'd come to me with this—or to one of you for that matter. I'll call him tonight."

I'd tried to talk to Ellen Beth, to see what she knew about Jon but she had opted to drive herself to her classes today. As soon as she got back to the hill, she had locked herself in the downstairs room with Chris, who, all reports said, was experiencing withdrawal symptoms that made heroin look like diet coke. Marcus had been in the process of bribing the sprites to clean up the sweat and vomit even as I'd talked to him, and the look he gave me was grim. I relayed all this to Green, whose own grim silence was enough to let me know that this problem was growing rapidly more pressing than our personal concerns, and we agreed to keep each other posted. Before I hung up, there was a sweetness in the air, the mild, spicy smell of wild flowers, and Green's kiss on my mind, and for a moment I allowed myself to miss him so badly my chest felt squashed and my

throat swollen, and I felt the same thing from Green.

Hurry home, beloved. I urged, and his silent pledge to do just that should have helped the weight on my chest, but it only made it heavier.

Bracken was out during dinner—the Avians are establishing a colony of sorts out in Camp Far West, because the property was cheaper than here in Foresthill and because it offered open foothills, a lake, and plenty of hunting room for jack-rabbits, field mice, and even fish. Bracken and the Avians we'd brought with us from the city this Christmas were building onto the four bedroom house Green had bought on some horse property out there, trying to give the independent Avians a little breathing room and some pride after getting caught up in the madness of a leader who was bent on leading them all to their death. Of course, the fact that the hill itself was often...well, sexually charged, was another reason to move the Avians. Their first sexual relation established their mating connection—one bad encounter on a powerful night, and they could be bound for life. Sort of like Nicky was to Green and I, which was a cautionary tale in itself.

So it was a quiet night—a dinner where the banter was forced—and then I took a visit to the vampire's common room, where the copper smell of blood and the clean smell of bodies that didn't sweat was as comforting as the gossip about who was feeding from whom. Marcus asked me if I wanted to watch *Sin City* with him and Phillip (who were not only back on speaking terms this evening, but were bantering like they were going to be in each other's bed before the movie was over, along with Phillip's were-panther girl of the day) but I had homework to do, and declined.

So only a little later Renny, Nicky and I were flopped on my bed (which was big enough to fit four or five more people our size) doing homework, and carefully avoiding any reference to the incredibly embarrassing personal revelations of the day. Or rather they were doing homework and I was trying not to weep blood over my physics book. I had written out all of the problems, but when I tried to make the next step my brain blocked up with math panic, and I'd been re-reading the chapter for an hour and it still wasn't making any sense. I was about two seconds from running to ask Arturo for help—I would have rather asked Grace who knew math, but she was working the store with Chloe, who, from what I could see, hated my guts with a mysterious passion—but I figured if Arturo didn't know the answer, *he* could call Grace. If Phillip hadn't had such a hard-on for everyone in the room, I would have asked him, but by now, he,

Marcus, and Tina were probably doing insane naked things so that would get pretty damn awkward. As it was I had nowhere to turn—Nicky might know, but that would mean addressing him personally. Renny had taken a poetry class instead of physics for just this reason, so I didn't even want to bring it up to her. Suddenly Bracken stuck his head into our room.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

I blinked, surprised to see him and then tried to shrug it off. "Nothing." I thought I sounded perfectly normal, but Renny and Nicky looked at each other, gathered their stuff and left the room, just like that, leaving me with my mouth open and face to face with a stubborn Bracken.

"Well?" he asked again, his patience thinning as he stood in front of the bed, looming down on me like I wasn't short enough standing up.

"It's stupid!" I blurted, "It's just this stupid physics homework...I don't do math...I took college algebra and thought that would be fine and now I've got this lab class and the equations just sort of swim around in front of my eyes like fish...I get the concepts but when I look at the page all I see are numbers and letters and they don't connect at all...and how did you know anyway?" I looked up at him, suddenly wondering when he'd gotten back. "Don't you have your own homework? Its physics...it's dumb and I can deal with it and...I mean, I deal with were-dogs in withdrawals and big scary birds and I do okay, so shouldn't I get to agonize over homework without making you crazy?" My voice cracked, and I couldn't go on, and out of nowhere I started to cry, and I couldn't say who was more surprised, Bracken or I.

I was in his arms in a heartbeat, and suddenly I felt myself giving in to the urge to just hunker down in his arms and have a good cry. My shoulders shook and my breath caught, and for just a few moments I was one big sob. The storm passed eventually, and I found that Bracken's arms around my shoulders were comforting and his chest under my cheek was the bedrock of the world, and even his smell made me feel better.

"You'll always make me crazy," he murmured into my hair. "You make me crazy fast asleep in the moonlight. You make me crazy when you're swearing so foully the flowers in the garden droop. You make me crazy when you're knitting a sweater I'm not supposed to know is for me." There was a pause and he took a deep, shaky breath. "You make me crazy when you're missing Green and so am I but you won't tell me because you think it will hurt me when it won't because I

miss him too and the two of you are still home to me." And another pause, and another shuddery breath. A quiet whisper. "You make me crazy when you forgive me for being angry, when I'm not even angry at you."

"I'm so..."

"Don't say it," he murmured. "You'll only make me crazy angry, because you don't have a thing to be sorry for, and I can help you with your physics, okay?"

I laughed, just enough to make myself hiccup. "Okay." We were quiet then, but neither one of us seemed inclined to move. After a moment I touched his cheek. "I love you, *due'alle*."

"I love you too, *due'ane*," he said, and still we just sat there, quietly, listening to our hearts beating, remembering that we didn't always have to hurt each other to love each other.

"Do you think you'll like the sweater?" I asked tentatively. After all, it was almost done.

He laughed softly and kissed my cheek. "I think I'll wear it until you're sick of seeing it.

I sniffled a little. "You have no idea of the capacity of my ego," I said grandly, and now he laughed in earnest and hugged me tighter, and neither of seemed to want to move, so we just stayed there, talking quietly about nothing.

We did eventually get to my physics, but not for a long time.

At 1:38 in the morning, a psychic scream ripped through Green's hill, sending me tear-assing down the hallways, to the staircase to the lower darkling, and hurtling downwards before I think Bracken had even touched the floorboards. I heard the murmur of people filtering in after me, but when I arrived at the safe room, the origin of the scream and the place where Chris Williams had been withdrawing from some nameless poison, Phillip, naked and wet, had just gotten there and was concentrating on working the dial lock for the room.

I stood there, vibrating on my toes to keep myself from urging him to hurry because heaven knows that only makes people fumble what they're doing, while a crowd of Green's people filed in after me. There was a foreboding,

pressing weight in my chest, and a lingering, familiar stench in the air, and we could all hear, even through the enforced steel walls, Ellen Beth shrieking in distress, so I turned to the people in the hall and called Arturo, Grace, and Marcus forward (he was also wet and naked—and here I was with my mental camera on stall), then shooed everyone but Bracken back. To my surprise Officer Max—wearing boxer shorts—waded through the crowd with Renny at his elbow and Nicky tagging along behind them.

"Max, this is going to be bad," I said urgently. "If you don't want to be ass deep in Green's hill, now's the time to bail."

Max's mouth quirked. "I'm balls deep already," he said dryly, and Renny, naked as a sylph, actually blushed and I hadn't though she could.

At last the tumbler clicked and the door swung open and I felt Bracken's hand on my elbow, along with a sudden pulling sensation, and then my mind was frozen, recoiling in horror, and there were black spots swimming in front of my vision as I tried to make sense of what it was I saw.

Ellen Beth was alone in the room where she had once been with her beloved, and she was covered in blood and she was shrieking loud enough to shatter glass. I have seen blood in all forms. I have even seen bodies, exploded by sound into a big greasy spot of blood and bone, but I had never seen anything like this off-orange black color, nor smelled any blood with the stench of garbage and vomit. There was another pull from my hand as I moved instinctively back, and I turned quizzically towards Bracken. My beloved was staring at the blood like a child would stare at a pretty, poisonous snake, murky eyes wide, lips slightly parted. I pushed at him to break the spell, but it was like pushing a boulder, and Arturo and I locked eyes around Bracken's body. Blood called to Bracken, any blood, even this abomination, and he must not touch it.

"I've got him," Arturo barked, and without pausing wrapped his arms around Bracken's middle and heaved, and Bracken is a big sidhe, but Arturo is just as big, and stronger in power, and Arturo picked him up easily and hauled him away without breaking a sweat. Beside me, I heard Renny give a little mewl of distress, and I turned to Max, distraught. She had lost her beloved like this, I thought, sickened. So had I, but where Adrian's blood had been sweet and fine, and Mitch's blood had been human and real, this bitter/burnt orange crap was an abomination. I stepped hastily back from the blood that had pooled behind the door and turned towards Max.

"Get her out of here," I said softly, and Max met my eyes and nodded. Good—he would protect Renny where he wouldn't protect himself—that spoke well of them both. When Max heaved Renny into his arms and waded back through the crowd, Nicky faded in to the background as well, and I turned towards the scene again and once again tried not to pass out.

I was still trying to breathe and to not smell the stench and to think at the same time and I realized that it would be a lot easier if the shrieking, which had carried on uncannily through our silent revulsion, would only stop.

"Ellen Beth!" I called, because she hadn't stopped shrieking this entire time. "Ellen Beth!" But nothing was getting through. She was staring at the epicenter of the blood explosion through wide open eyes, dripping with the foulness that had once been her beloved, staring at the place where Chris had probably stood even as he'd died. My first impulse was to walk up to her and smack her to get her attention, but I didn't want anybody—especially little mortal me—touching that blood. I turned to Phillip, who was looking at the fouled blood like it was going to make him hurl. Good—at least I wouldn't have to bind and gag the vampires in order to keep them away from this crap.

Suddenly Grace stepped forward, and, bless the mother in her, she knew how to handle a hysterical woman covered in slime. "Phillip," She barked "Go get a tarp or a raincoat or something...and gloves—you know where I keep the cleaning shit—and slickers for you and Marcus—and jeans and boots..." Phillip was raising his eyebrows like she was talking to a child.

"Dammit, Phillip!" I snapped, "This is fucking important—you listen to Grace, you do what she says, she's trying to keep you alive."

"Damned straight!" Grace nodded, then continued, "Don't touch her, don't touch the floor, the two of you need to scoop her up and take her down to the garage, and hose her off. When she's completely clean, scoop her up in another tarp, take her to the pool in the smaller Goddess grove, and dump her in. Leave her there until one of the sidhe comes out to heal her. Don't touch her skin. Don't touch her hair. Don't touch the water running off her body. Do you hear me?"

"Yeah, I got it!" He threw up his hands, like this was no big deal, and I felt a stab of panic.

"Phillip, don't blow us off...Marcus saw this guy—you can smell that evil shit in the blood...Do you get us...we want you to fucking live!" My voice was

getting shrill, but I couldn't help it—Ellen Beth was still screaming, her voice getting higher in octaves if not softer, and Arturo who should be here to help me was off locking Bracken in a blood proof room or something and it was me and Grace and this...horror...this abomination...and people needed to listen.

Phillip looked at me, finally with somber eyes. "I hear you, Lady Cory. I'll keep our people safe." He disappeared, moving in hyperspeed, and I was left, staring helplessly at Ellen Beth who was still hysterical.

"And that," said Grace with grim satisfaction, "Is why we waited months for you to come back. Now do something really important and shut her up so we can think."

Bless her, I thought, Bless her bless her...I smiled grimly and turned to the shrieking that seemed to be escalating, if that were even possible.

"Ellen Beth!" I tried again. "Ellen Beth Williams!" There was a fade in her screeching, and I tried again. "Ellen Beth Shrick Williams, beloved of Chris Williams, were-creature by Jon Chase, child of..." hell, like I knew here parents' names? "Of the Shricks, Ellen Beth Shrick Williams listen to me." And she was, her eyes white like boiled eggs against the crap-orange nastiness of polluted blood that took up the rest of her face. Those eyes rolled towards me, and she whimpered, and I had a moment to wonder if I had looked like that when I'd been covered with Adrian's blood, before I blocked the thought out of my mind so I didn't come fucking unglued.

"Ellen Beth," I said after a moment of eerie—if thought clearing—quiet, "We're going to wash you off. We're going to try to make you...clean...of whatever it is that infected your beloved. We're going to make you want to live. But you have to calm down. You have to let the vampires hose you off, and you have to let them put you in the Goddess' pool and you have to let the sidhe touch you to heal, or you might end up just like Chris and that would really suck!" I was nodding as I spoke, and, wonder of all wonders, she began to nod as well.

Arturo was still wrestling Bracken, and dammit, I needed to talk to a sidhe. "Grace—I need a healing sidhe—any ideas? Someone who would know whether or not this would be a threat to themselves?"

Grace closed her eyes, thought, shook her head. "Ask Green," she said, and I wondered if I was actually that stupid.

"I'm such a dork," I murmured. *Green*. And I didn't have to try for urgency or for panic or even for control—it was, oddly enough, all there.

What are...God, Goddess and other... he swore, because I let him see through my eyes. *Don't touch it, beloved*. He begged, and I gave a silent amen.

Its got Bracken totally hypnotized, and Arturo is wrestling him to safety. I need someone who can gauge if she can be healed, or cleansed or whatever, but who won't put himself in danger.

How about herself Green asked, and suddenly in my head was a vision of a tiny fey with features so delicate they were almost transparent and eyes the most lovely shade of violet: Sweet. Sweet was a sidhe, but she was smaller than most of her kind—and she tended to be promiscuous in a species that specialized in sensual abandon. I hadn't known she was a healer—I guess you tended to underestimate a person when they're hitting on everyone you knew—including yourself. Green had needed to pull her aside when we'd gotten back this Christmas and carefully explain that infidelity on Bracken's or my part meant a painful nasty death for Bracken in order to get her to stop trying to climb into Bracken's bed on the nights I spent with Green. But she was also kind and compassionate, and she had a pixie's humor, and she was one of ours. She was there by my side almost before I called her, and just as she arrived, Marcus and Phillip—or so I assumed, because all I saw were bulky, fluttery black blurs—came hurtling down the wide hallway with its high ceiling.

"Ellen Beth..." I called, holding my hand up to forestall the boys. They stopped in mid-air and hovered there, covered head to toe in gloves, jeans, boots and even breath-masks and goggles. Ellen Beth's eyes rolled wildly in their orange mask of tainted blood, and her breath came unevenly in pants, but I had her attention.

"Ellen Beth, they're going to cover you, move you, hose you off, and then they're going to have you strip down and put you in...in a special pool of water. Do you see the woman next to me?" Ellen Beth's eyes darted to Sweet beside me, and she nodded jerkily. "She's going to..." I looked at Sweet, shrugged. The rule at Green's hill was sensual and consensual—no one ever violated it. "She's going to see if touching you is safe for her. If it is, she's going to lay hands on you, however you want her to, she will lay hands on you, and make sure you're going to be okay. Do you understand?"

Ellen Beth nodded, and her lips moved..."Chr.... Chris...." She

shuddered.

I closed my eyes, swallowed. "I know, sweetheart, I know," I whispered. "We'll help you with that too, but it will never go away."

And then I nodded to Marcus and Phillip who swept in and out, wrapping her up and whisking her out before my eyes could make sense of their motion. Sweet turned and met my eyes in stillness afterwards. "Don't worry," she said with a smile. "I'll tend to her."

"Tend to yourself too," I answered. "Only touch her if it's going to be safe for you. I mean it, Sweet. We don't want to lose you either."

Those tiny features lit up suddenly with a warm, genuine smile. "Bless you, Cory—I'll be fine, but thank you so much for worrying." She turned and followed where the vampires had gone, her naked body even tinier and more vulnerable than Renny's had been when Max had hauled her out of the room.

There was a heavy silence then, and as I looked after Sweet's retreating form I realized that the crowd at the entrance was waiting for me to say something— anything—to give them direction. Grace and I met eyes for a moment. She nodded towards me, encouraging, and then I turned towards the group.

"This blood is toxic, people," I said, sticking to the basics. "I want as few people in contact with it as possible—we're still trying to find what caused it, but until we do, and until we get this cleaned up, I don't want anyone near it. It's just not safe for you. Green is researching this...whatever this is—any information you people have, any encounters or godawful smells or terrible sounds or anything that reminds you of this...abomination—you need to tell one of us about it. Arturo, Grace, Bracken, Renny, Nicky—you know who you look to, and you know we look out for you. Keep your eyes open—but for now, go back to sleep, and thank the Goddess this hasn't touched us before."

There was a murmur of satisfaction then, like they'd needed to hear the order in order to retreat in good conscience, and then Grace spoke up next to me. "Nicky—Nicky you stay. We need you."

Nicky sorted himself out from the gathered, and I looked at Grace in surprise.

"How were you planning to clean this up?" she asked me bluntly, "Because

honey, I don't think there's enough bleach in Placer County.”

Oh. "Power?" I asked, and we both nodded. "A shitload...a purge...and enough of it to vaporize the furniture and the electronics and melt it into the metal on the floor." It was extreme—it was frightening, because the last time I'd unleashed that much power to that sort of purpose, I'd almost melted the mountain I'd been standing on.

"I..." I looked at Grace and saw her shake her head. I couldn't say it—I couldn't say I was afraid my control wasn't good enough because everybody in the damned hill had supersensitive hearing and they were now all tuned to *me*, and that much uncertainty could carry down the damn corridor and undermine everything Green had ever worked for.

"So I get to be a battery?" Nicky said dryly, looking at the two of us and trying to guess what we weren't saying.

I pulled out enough to smile at him reassuringly. "After the other night, darlin', did you doubt it?" And that got me a truly happy smile. I checked the corridor behind me, and realized it was cold in here with all those people gone, since all I was wearing was one of Green's T-shirts. (Bracken had fetched it for me before we'd gone to bed tonight, and as we fell asleep we'd both breathed in Green's smell like it was a wood-fire and hot chocolate on a snowy day.)

I took a couple of steps back from the doorway, and Grace stood behind me, then I held out my hand and Nicky clasped it firmly. Purposefully I remembered sex with Nicky the other night, and it had been *good* sex, and all my nerve endings *had* lit up, and now that buzz of arousal built in my stomach, buzzed around and filled my chest. I thought of Bracken, and how tender he'd been tonight, making up for the bruises last night, and my chest grew tight, and then I thought of Green, and that wild moment when he'd been in a bed full of naked, beautiful people, and I knew I had to let out the charge in my chest or it would stop my breath.

I held out my free hand, palm out, and saw the super-charged blue glow take it over, and it too built and buzzed and fueled and became massive, and then, with a prayer to the Goddess, I thought about walls. I wanted it to expand—but only to the first layer of the metal wall in the darkling room. I didn't want it to melt any more than that. And when I had the dimensions of the room firmly fixed in my mind and knew what I had to do to make my power fit it, I let it loose.

There was a clean melt, so hot and so intense that there weren't even any fumes left, as the furniture and the wood paneling and the carpet and the television and stereo all vaporized into light, and then the blood fought back.

My power surged against my hands, and I pushed harder, and then a zap of my own whirling light came charging towards my chest and now I was pissed.

"FUCK YOU!" I screamed, because I didn't know what was fighting me but nobody did that with my own will, and my anger did the trick because the bolt blew back into the room and now we heard a sizzle and suddenly the room was down to three metal walls, the inside of the door, and a slightly cooked ventilation shaft all of which gleamed as though freshly cast and polished.

I stood and stared into the room for a moment, making sure it was clean and we were safe, and then my knees buckled, and Nicky's too, and we both sank gracelessly to the floor, leaning against each other shoulder to shoulder.

"Cocksucking mother-fucking son of a whore's bitch," I swore with a shaking voice. "Fucking blood tried to zap me with my own power...this fucker's gotta go down and hard..."

Ah, the dulcet sounds of my beloved. Green murmured in my head, surprising a smile from me as I flopped limply against Nicky. *I especially liked the part where you imagined me in bed to fuel your power surge.*

I blushed. *It worked. I'm glad you were with me, beloved.* And I swallowed against tired tears. I wanted him *here*, with all of us, and me in particular.

I'm packing as we speak. He replied grimly. *But I don't know when I can get a flight out.*

Of Marin County?

Of Huston. I got here an hour ago.

More weak tears. *I'm sorry, beloved. I'm sorry we need you right now.*

Shhhh...Never be sorry for that. Now let Grace tend you, right?

I nodded, but as Grace came to scoop me up I said, "Get Nicky first—put him in my bed with Brack, okay?"

"Oh yay," Nicky said weakly. "Puppy pile."

Then I felt Nicky's weight move and my side became cold with his absence. I murmured, "And Green's on his way."

"I don't know why," Grace said, taking pains to make sure I didn't flop against the hardwood of the floor as she scooped Nicky up. "You did just fine on your own."

I giggled weakly, because I thought she was being facetious, and suddenly Arturo was there picking me up off the chill floor. "I don't see what's so funny, Corinne Carol-Anne," he grumbled softly. "She's right—you're doing very well."

"But I want Green!" And I realized I was whining, and Arturo knew it too because he laughed.

"Well far be it from me to get between the two of you when you want each other."

"How's Bracken?" I asked, too tired for another blush. The stairwell was moving by me at a sedate pace, and I knew Arturo was taking his time so we could talk.

"Unconscious. Damned blood call was not letting him go tonight."

"It was the...toxin, the poison...whatever was wrong with Chris's blood, it dicked with Bracken's mind but good," I said. I had felt weaker before, after using power, or when I'd been really sick, but the men in Green's hill liked carrying me around, and I was pretty grateful for it right now. I leaned my head against Arturo's chest and sighed. "Bracken's going to be so pissed about this."

Arturo grunted. "It's in Bracken's nature to be fierce about many things."

"Arturo, that was almost poetry..." I murmured, surprised and pleased with the description.

"I learn from the best, Corinne Carol-Anne," he replied enigmatically, and then we were in my room and I was getting tucked in between Bracken and Nicky. Even exhausted the two of them had rolled away from each other, leaving a clear space for me on the gargantuan sidhe-sized king-sized bed. Arturo tucked the covers up around my chin and I cuddled up to Bracken's too-still form, and Nicky spooned up behind me and the lights went off and I was out.

An hour later the sound of Renny's screaming shot me bolt upright in bed,

but before I could scramble out from around the boys, Max came through my door with a sobbing Renny in his arms.

"She needs you," he murmured, and Bracken grunted and shifted over some more which made me happy because it meant his sleep was natural now, and not Arturo-induced.

"Everybody hop in," I grumbled, trying to focus in the dark. Max laid Renny between Nicky and me and was going to leave the room when I said. "You too, Officer Max, if you want. There's plenty of room." Because there had been something lonely and lost about that retreating back in the plain white boxers.

"Bracken won't kill me in my sleep, will he?" he asked, but he was climbing from the foot of the bed to fit himself between Nicky and Renny, and I was surprised to see that his homophobia had receded to the extent that he didn't even bat an eyelash when Nicky turned into him blindly, searching for human comfort.

"Not without warning," I yawned, and settled down again, this time with Bracken at my back and my arms around a shivering Renny.

"It was bad for her," Max said, fitting his arms around mine and meeting my eyes over Renny. "To see someone else die the way Mitch did."

"And Adrian," I surprised myself by saying tightly. "It didn't do a lot for me to see it either."

"You're handling it better," he stated.

"Adrian's blood was better," I murmured. "Vampires go out the way they've lived. Adrian's blood...it was almost cleansing...sweet and good and life affirming, even as he died again." Max's eyes grew thoughtful, even in the dark.

"And Renny didn't kill a hundred people with her grief," I added harshly after a moment. "Or suck the life out of the men she loved when it still threatened to kill her. I can't let my grief or my love or my passion hurt the people around me any more than necessary."

Max was a mortal human, and he used to regard me with desire and contempt. What I saw on his face now was much gentler, and much more important. "Go to sleep, Lady Cory," he said, and I grimaced.

"Not you too..." I yawned. It was three in the morning—our alarm went off at six.

"Yes. Me too. Now hush, or you'll wake my beloved."

I smiled then, as I fell asleep, because I knew Renny was really truly in love with Max, and to hear this stoic cop, who once upon a time didn't seem to have any poetry at all in his soul use that word gave me hope that there would be a happy ever after.

GREEN

Funky Man

Huston was fucking cold in January, Green thought dismally as he hauled his suitcase and duffel bag from the hotel to the rental car. Not that Foresthill didn't have its share of snow, but...but not on Green's temperate hill, anyway. The flat, cast-iron colored sky of Huston was uninterrupted by any mountains but the man-made kind, and the effect was, to a sidhe who had spent the last hundred and fifty years in the Sierra Foothills, oddly claustrophobic.

Green wanted home so badly he could taste it in his throat like an old lover.

There was a wild-eyed, homeless man, crouched at the corner of the hotel, scenting the wind like a hound. His skin was crusted with grime, and hair of an indeterminate color lay, twisted into dreadlocks, close about his scalp, visibly crawling with vermin. The look he gave Green was the look of a dog who had been beaten so badly he didn't know whom to turn to in search of food.

"That's him..." the man half sang to himself, looking at Green longingly from eyes so brown they made mahogany look gray. "That's the fine and mighty lord, gonna turn, gonna turn, gonna turn away the funky man..."

Green stopped short. Looked at the man. Blinkered. Blinkered again. Dropped his duffel and came closer, trying hard not to gag at the smell.

"Hello, brother," he said cautiously, looking at his fellow sidhe. He hunkered down, not close enough to intimidate, but close enough to look, stunned and appalled, past the filth and grime of living from the tainted, buried

earth of the city. "You've been alone a long time."

Those brown eyes glistened silver, true silver, and Green caught his breath as a drop of molten metal rolled down the filthy face as only a true sidhe could weep silver when moved.

"Funky man's no one's brother," he choked. "Funky man got left behind, funky man's got no more mind. No one sees the funky man, no one wants to. No one can."

"I see you, Funky Man," Green said gently, his mind racing. Sidhe were strong. They were brilliant, and those who were mad were quietly mad, alone in the woods or the hills where no one could call their madness anything but the behavior of a fox or a bear or a rabbit. Sidhe didn't just...break, like cheap plastic toys to become a part of the human wreckage that littered the cities.

"You see me..." Funky man whispered. "You see me, you turn away. But I had to try, fine lord, just to see you...just to hear the voice of a man who was my brother...hollow man came, and sucked me empty, brother sidhe...and funky man's been so alone..." And now more tears, not the silver kind, but the plain brine of a flesh and blood, came spilling over Funky Man's face, washing away thin curls of grime. In the relatively clear spaces, Green could see that the man's skin wasn't dark brown, or chocolate colored as he'd first believed, but a gold-toned violet, so deep that it only took a little dust, a little grime, to act as the glamour that his lost brother could apparently no longer conjure.

"The hollow man?" Green ventured, not wanting to upset Funky Man any more than necessary.

"Pretty..." Funky mumbled, "So pretty...pretty human boy, love them human boys and girls...they used to be my whole wide world, but hollow man done sucked me dry...didn't give me a goddamned why...all funky's left to do is cry..."

The hollow man. Green shivered. He hadn't had any news at all of their enemy, this creature who tainted blood and addicted were creatures and killed sylphs and smelled like fermenting flesh. But Funky Man, whoever he once had been, had known this threat up close and personal, and had only partly survived.

And besides, Green thought wretchedly, looking longingly at his duffel, and the rental car he'd bribed a puzzled mechanic to douse in salt water before

he'd driven away. Besides. He couldn't just leave this lost brother, this wretched desolate Funky Man, who had hunched out in the cold waiting for the sound of a fellow sidhe's voice and the dismissal of his eyes. But oh, Goddess...Goddess...

"I want to go home, Funky Man," Green said miserably, feeling plain salt tears start in his own eyes. "I have a beloved, and family, and lovers who need me, who are under attack even now."

Funky Man made a miserable keening sound in his throat, and before he could break into sobs, Green threw a reluctant arm over his shoulder, and felt the sigh that rippled through the man's body at simple animal contact.

"I want to go home, brother," Green murmured, "But I want to take you with me, okay?"

And Funky Man lurched against Green's shoulder, sobbing in earnest now. "Oh please, my brother, please...don't leave me in the cold anymore..."

"No," Green said, being careful not to let his plaited hair brush against Funky Man's lice-ridden head. "But how about a bath first, right?"

"Right...right...all is right..." Funky Man chanted, and Green was grateful that it was three-thirty in the morning with no prying eyes to see as he grabbed his duffel with one hand and hauled Funky with the other, back into the hotel and up the two floors to his room, which was, after all, paid up for another four days.

It took two tubs of hot, hot water, and half of the generous amount of home-made shampoo in Green's duffel. Midway through, he summoned a couple of sprites—they seemed to rotate to travel with him, for which he was ever grateful—and had them 'fetch' scissors, a clean brush, clean comb, and box of Rid-X from a local pharmacy. He spent the second batch of water cutting Funky Man's hair, then treating the scalp for the lice which had, on the sidhe's rich blood, grown bloated, fat, and even slower than these vermin usually moved. Funky Man wept quietly through the ministrations, looking at his long, clean, pitifully thin limbs mournfully, petting his severed dreadlocks with doleful fingers, then dutifully allowing Green to wrap them in a plastic bag, along with his rank clothes for disposal.

"I was beautiful," he wept. "I was sidhe, and I was so pretty. So, so pretty."

"You are still pretty, brother," Green said kindly, rubbing a now clean, gold-violet back soothingly with a bath sponge. "You are still pretty—but we

need to fatten you up and make you strong, and you will feel well again.”

Funky Man nodded, happily it seemed, and rested his head on his arm as Green finished with one last wash of all cracks, crevices, and hidden parts. There were scars on the sidhe's body, when the sidhe never scarred—scars from scrapes, from cuts, scars around his anus, where, heaven knows, he had probably been violated on the streets. Adrian had possessed those scars too, Green thought, and in spite of a hundred and fifty years of healing, and Cory's magnificent healing effort in the garden, one magic filled summer night, they had never left his marble white skin.

"Good touch, Lord of Leaves, good touch, Lord of Shadows..." Funky sang, and Green made an effort to pull himself back to the present, making sure to put just a little bit of power in his touch, a little bit of healing, not enough to startle. But that didn't stop him from remembering Adrian.

Adrian had been beautiful and broken too, Green mused, but in spite of the similarities of the situation, and the actions, of bathing and healing a filthy, damaged victim, the similarities ended there. Where Funky Man had been despondent, Adrian had been full of rage. Green had let Adrian take out the rage on his own, quick healing body, and then taught him what real love could be. He wasn't sure if Funky Man were strong enough even for that kind of healing, not now, not yet. But even more important, Green thought sadly as he bundled Funky Man into a towel, rubbing the thin limbs—still straight, still with the possibility for strength—until the violet-gold skin pinkened and glowed with health and a remembered vitality—even more important than the weakness, or the skin color or even the species, was the most vital fact of all.

Green had loved Adrian dearly, even from that first glower of those furious sky-spangled eyes. Just as Adrian had loved Cory, with one touch on her palm, and she had loved them both, in spite of all her efforts to the contrary, Green had loved Adrian as his beloved from the very start.

Funky Man was a brother, and they may even share their flesh together, but Green wasn't sure, here in this lonely, quiet hotel room in the middle of the night, if he had room for one more heartbreak of a beloved in his sore and battered soul.

After Funky Man was dry, Green sent the sprites for food—they returned, exhausted and only at half their usual glow, with what appeared to be Grace's leftover vegetable lasagna, and Green almost wept with gratitude. He cupped his

hands and bade the seven sprites to gather there, and then he bent his head, close enough to see the tiny details of their other-than-human faces. Legend said that the sprites were made when the Goddess and the other took the forms of birds and bats and flying bugs, and often their piquant faces took on those very characteristics. Softly, with gratitude and love, Green breathed a little power onto his tiny gathered brethren, and they glowed brightly again, as they collapsed on each other in an instant, satisfyingly spelled sleep. "Good job, my little ones," he whispered, and placed them carefully in the top of his duffle bag.

When he and Funky had finished off the lasagna—Funky ate voraciously, but had room in his stomach for very little in order to be full—Green wrapped Funky Man tightly in a brown and green quilt that Grace had made him just for travel to help him remember home. Together they lay, Funky Man's thin, shivering body balled up into a tight wad of self-defense. Green gathered him into his arms, soothing and singing, until Funky Man's shivering subsided, and he began his own humming in his throat. As miserable as Green was to be alone and away from home, he had to smile. Good—brother could still sing.

The darkness of the hotel weighed on them both for a moment, and then the Funky Man spoke, his voice still moving up and down to the tune Green had started.

"Green man has a beloved, beautiful is she? Tell me 'bout beloved, Green man, wont you please tell me?"

Green's throat caught. Ah, Goddess, to talk about Cory. He'd been locked in business meetings with humans since he'd left the sylphs—although he was familiar with the people who dealt with franchise holders, he'd scrupulously kept his distance from them. He'd never mentioned his personal life, he never shared lunches with them—as far as most of them thought, he still lived in England and was as gay as an Easter Parade. And sometimes, he'd thought wryly, according to their standards, so he was.

"She's not beautiful to humans," Green said roughly. "But she smiles, and the world grows brighter. She has a mouth like a sewer rat—unless she's using it on you, and then it's like an angel, or unless she's speaking from her heart, and then it's like the thunder of a thousand waterfalls. She's human, but in one month she managed to love me, and our beloved, and when he died she survived the loss. Barely, but she survived. She even grew stronger. Her heart's too big for just one beloved—especially one who has to spend so much of his time with his

people— so I share her with another, except it never feels as though we are sharing because she gives us everything with every breath. And she doesn't see it. Good men love her, fine sidhe, beautiful vampires, heartbreaking shape-changers—and she doesn't let us down." It came pouring out of him, praise for Cory, frustration that he couldn't be home for her, and Funky Man lay still in Green's arms and listened.

"Funky Man likes humans," he said after a quiet moment when Green's heart was too full to speak. "Humans love Funky Man like sidhe never could."

Green grimaced, there in the dark. "We can be a cruel species," he said harshly.

"Not you, Green man," Funky murmured, yawning, and Green wondered how hard it must be to sleep on the streets, how many years of exhaustion had haunted the battered Funky Man. "You're all that is good. Be here in the morning, Green Man?" And the pleading note in his voice hurt to hear. "Don't be no dream of Funky Man?"

"I'll be here," Green reassured, and with that, Funky Man faded into a sweet, deep sleep.

Green couldn't claim the same. His mind drifted to Cory, and although he was weak from helping her earlier, and it got harder and harder to move in and out of her mind, he visited her bed, where she lay snuggled with...he had to smile. With everyone, as it seemed. Even Max had climbed in, and Nicky had spooned him as naturally as if he'd been Green himself. Scary night, Green thought sadly. It had been a scary night, an awful sight for all of them. For Bracken and Cory and Renny, it had been a night of cruel memories resurrected in the most brutal of ways. He would call in the morning, he thought, kissing her brow with the unsubstantial presence that he was. He would call her and disappoint her, and she would hear about Funky Man and say "Of course you have to stay, beloved."

And he would miss her even more.

CORY

Aversions

The alarm went off at six and I was the only one who moved. I started off by shoving at Bracken until he groaned. "Wha'th'fu?" and I said "School." And then I shoved him into the wall so I could crawl out between Renny's overgrown-tabby-sized body and his own oak-tree sized one.

Renny surfaced from under the covers (she had ended up with the comforter drawn completely over her head while the rest of us had our heads lined up on the pillows like children) and said "School? Are you fucking kidding me?"

"It's Tuesday—we haven't even had these classes yet!" I urged, heading towards the bathroom. "If we don't go today, they're going to drop us."

"Aw crap," she said at the same time Nicky muttered "Oh Jesus, Cory," and then I heard a thump and a "Shit!" and figured he'd forgotten that he was on the end of the bed and fallen off.

I turned around at the bathroom and saw Nicky crawling up from the floor to go use his own shower and Renny moving quietly out of bed so as not to disturb Max, and I smiled. "Bracken?" I said.

"Ugghhh..."

"Do you realize that the only people left in that bed right now are you and Max? And that one of you is naked?"

There were two more thumps and a "Oh...oh...ewww...ickkkkk!" And a "Oh, Jesus, shit Cory, did you have to bring that up!" And suddenly the two men were standing up and facing each other with eyes that were completely awake but brains that were obviously catching up.

Renny turned around at the bedroom door saying "Which one of you big strong men just squealed like a little girl?"

"I think that would be the bi-sexual one," I said dryly, raising amused eyebrows in my beloved's direction.

"Oh crap," Max said, blinking with disbelief at Bracken's naked body, "Don't you have to put a red flag on that thing if it's not in the garage?"

"Be careful little man," Bracken answered with grim amusement, "Or it will reach out and touch you."

"You win. You're obviously the, uhm, bigger man." And with that Max flashed an ironic grin at me and turned to follow Renny out the door, leaving me laughing softly and shaking my head.

"Feel better?" I asked Bracken as he moved in for his morning hug.

"About what?" he asked complacently, and I laughed some more and raised to my toes so I could wrap my arms around his neck and pull him down for a kiss.

"About the amount of testosterone in your ego," I replied, after a touch of his warm lips on mine. I was only partly facetious now, and Bracken's expression grew dark.

"What happened after Phillip opened the door?" he asked, seriously.

"You looked at the blood and disappeared," I answered in kind. I did him the courtesy of not hiding how worried I had been. "The blood was...contaminated. Poisoned. Obscene. I can't explain it any better...you know what real blood looks like—and this wasn't it."

"Where did the blood come from?" Bracken asked, and I had to blink twice.

"You don't remember *anything*? No, no, obviously not..." I shook my head, started over again. And found it was harder to say than it had been to see. I swallowed, took a breath, swallowed again, and said, "He'd exploded. Chris Williams—there was no bone shrapnel, no..." I'd seen them when a vampire had exploded on me, when Green had killed the men who had killed Adrian..."No sticky bits...it was just blood..."

Bracken closed his eyes. "Ah, Goddess..." he moaned, and his arms came around me crushing me against him like he could protect me even from the memory, and I knew suddenly that I'd been waiting for Bracken or for Green so that I could fall gently apart about this. I'd been strong last night. I'd led our people. This morning I got to tremble like Jell-O in an earthquake.

"But it was bad blood. It wasn't clean or powerful...it wasn't even...human or were or anything anymore." And now I was cold, and only Bracken could warm me.

"I'm sorry. I wasn't there for you. I'm so sorry..."

"It's not your fault, beloved. It wasn't anyone's..." I sniffled, and knew I had to pull myself together. We had to leave, and I had to check on Ellen Beth and I just couldn't do this. Not right now. "The blood fought back," I said after a vulnerable moment, and I was pissed off enough about this to pull my spine up and stop shaking. "Nicky was there, and Green was in my head, but it put up a hell of a fight—whatever the fuck it was, it tried to zap me back."

"The *blood*?"

"Whatever was in it," I amended. "But it pissed me off."

Bracken smiled, a small smile, and I knew that he was having his own reaction. We all remembered, we all had dreamed about it, we all woke up with the cold sweats. Arturo, Renny and I got to remember Mitch, watching Renny change to cat form with a puzzled expression, then a sudden, panicked look of discomfort, then pain, then his body, like red paint in a centrifuge, simply becoming gore. And so many more of us—Bracken included, remembered Adrian's defiant smile as he swooped out of the sky to grab the silver net that he thought was threatening us, but was really a trap for him. And we all remembered his body fragmenting, like a popped water balloon, and the fine spray of blood that had covered us all.

"Well, I'm rather pissed off about getting sucked into it so badly that I don't even remember it," Bracken said after a moment, and we both swallowed, sort of a tandem vow to be pissed off instead of devastated, and then I grabbed his hand and hauled him into the shower. We didn't make love, but we did touch an awful lot, and Bracken whispered lazy suggestions in my ear about what we could spend our days doing if I wasn't so hell bent on going to school.

"I was all for quitting," I reminded him wistfully as he toweled my hair dry. "Green insisted we keep slogging away."

Bracken grunted. That was the one argument he had no retort for, and we both knew it. Conversation stumbled then, both of us thinking about Green and how badly we missed him, I guess, and we fell into the morning routine we'd begun to establish in December, when we'd become roommates as well as lovers.

Of course, my routine was a lot simpler now—a year ago, before I'd met Adrian, I would have spent twenty minutes glopping on mascara, packing on white powder, and penciling my eyes black, then another ten, carefully arranging my spiky goth-silver earrings and making sure none were missing.

Today, I had a delicate row of yellow-gold hoops in a sweet little line up each ear—the sprites had put them in as I'd slept on Christmas Eve, and it had been a true surprise and a splendid gift. They never got infected, never caught on anything, and never needed to be taken out. I liked the look—it was a compromise between the insecure bitch I had been when I'd met Adrian, the pathetic mess I became after Adrian died who didn't wear any jewelry at all, and the stronger, wiser person I think I'd become in the last year.

The make-up, however, was still a project under construction. I had lightened up on the make-up after I moved to Green's hill and for the last month or so, Bracken and I had been waging a silent war over whether or not I should wear any at all. I bought it, Bracken threw it away, and the sprites (who liked me best) rescued only the stuff they liked from the trash and often added colors of their own—I was particularly fond of this earthy mauve eye-shadow that was spangled with gold. Bracken would see me put the make-up on, grunt "you don't need to wear that crap" and then throw away only what he didn't like. Through the last few weeks we had arrived at couple of mutually satisfactory make-up schematics—the mauve eye-shadow stayed, the black lipstick (left over from my Goth days and applied when I was in a snit with Bracken) was worn once and never seen again.

Bracken went to the kitchen to get breakfast and then back to our rooms to get ready. I had just finished shoving my running shoes and sweats in a plastic bag and then shoving the bag into the back-pack with my knitting and water bottles (oh, yeah—and my schoolbooks) when Arturo came through the door without knocking.

"Cory—Green's on the phone for you," he said abruptly, and I blinked, the simple motion covering up a well of disappointment.

"Won't we see him today?" I asked, but I guess I already knew the answer to that.

"He's found...a brother. A sidhe—who's met our enemy," Arturo replied, and he looked so distressed that I found I wanted to comfort him, instead of being comforted myself.

"That's good?"

"He's been...on the street... Green says he has...scars. And...lice. And...gray in his hair."

Oh, Goddess, no wonder Arturo was shaken, I thought, a bit horrified myself. "And he didn't have a leader? A hill of his own?" No brothers to care for him? No sisters to share flesh with? No Green to make it all better?

"No one." Arturo swallowed. "Green wants to bring him home, but we're working out how—a simple salt water wash on a rental isn't going to do it with this guy..."

"The Cadillac," I said abruptly. Of course—the Caddy was Arturo's favorite car. It had been washed, and spelled and blessed, and driven so many times by elves and sidhe that the lower fey actually slept in it when they felt the urge. The lower fey were like canaries in the magic coal mine—what was bad for the higher fey usually got to them first.

Arturo's eyes widened. "Of course—who's going to drive it?"

I sighed, and rubbed my forehead. I needed to get on the phone with Green.

"He's talking to Grace right now," Arturo reassured gently, and I gave him a weak smile.

"Okay. How's he sound?" I asked tentatively, already sort of knowing the answer.

"Weak," Arturo replied baldly. "Frustrated. Missing you. Missing home. Before he's been gone a week, at most—this is his longest trip away from the hill."

I swallowed. Oh, my beloved—so far away from our touch.

Our touch.

"Go get Nicky," I said abruptly. "Get Nicky, tell him to pack, tell him Renny and I will take his notes from school. And (think think think think)...get Leah, if she's game." Leah had a revolving pantheon of shape changers and sidhe in her bed—sleeping with our leader should be no big deal. "If not, find another shape changer who is. If you can find a sidhe that won't get sick in the travel, find one." Instinctively I looked towards my wall for a window, but my room was towards the middle of the hill—the wrap-around bay window affected the living room and all the bedrooms across the hall. "The sun's not up yet, right? We've got about a half an hour." Arturo nodded that I was right, and I went on,

thinking as I spoke. "When I get the phone from Grace, have her find a vampire that wouldn't mind sleeping in the Caddy's trunk and have him jump in right now. We want one of everybody—but especially Nicky—he's tied to me, I'm on the hill..." I swallowed, feeling sad and hopeful and helpless, even as I planned my ass off. "Green needs his people, Arturo. Let's get them to him."

Arturo nodded, a slow smile making the silver caps on his teeth flash. "I can drive, Corinne Carol Anne, if you like."

A part of me leapt of the idea, but I found myself shaking my head no—and blushing furiously. "Uhm...Green's going to need people who...who can touch him," I said lamely, not becoming uncomfortable with the idea of sending lovers to sustain my lover until actually having to put it into words.

Arturo's copper-lightning colored eyes widened, and then he looked vaguely embarrassed. "I should have thought of that," he said sheepishly, and I put my hand on his arm and then launched myself into the full hug.

"We all miss him," I said softly. "If I wasn't next in the power chain...if the hill didn't need me...I'd be over on the next flight and I'd walk home to be with him." I smiled a little as I felt the comfort of Arturo's completely platonic and unconditionally accepting arms around me. "And Bracken would be with me."

I felt Arturo nod as his chin brushed my hair. "And you would have magnificent adventures in the wilderness," he said lightly, "And I would still be left behind."

"With your vampire queen," I said dryly, and felt a stillness. Oh no..."Give her and Chloe some time," I murmured. "Grace loves you—you know that..."

"And speaking of..." he replied brusquely, obviously not wanting to discuss the matter, "You need to go get the phone."

A minute later I was taking the phone from Grace and pointing her towards Arturo, making kissing faces at her and glaring. And then Green spoke and I didn't have time or brain cells or heart muscles left for anybody else because he sounded sad and tired and *oh, Goddess!* I missed him so badly I had to sit down in the middle of the room and rest my head against the couch.

"How you holding up, luv?" he asked gently.

"As well as you are," I told him with some sincere irony.

"Oh no—I expect much better than that from you, Corinne Carol Anne." And finally there was his humor, the dryness that made him Green. "So—have you tested the limits of the bed?"

I had to laugh. I had dreamt of a field of mustard flowers and lupins last night—he must have been checking up on me. "Sleeps five—we could probably fit another were-kitty at the foot, but Bracken might kick her off in his sleep..." I giggled. "You should have heard him squeal like a little girl when he realized he was in bed with Officer Max...absolutely priceless."

We both shared a laugh, and suddenly we were both very sober. "I'm sending you a care package," I said brightly into the strained silence.

"Cookies and letters?" Again, that try for humor.

"I know you've been sending the sprites for food—cookies are the last thing you need!" Grace had been making a fresh batch of cookies every night and placing them on the table—she told me that in the morning about half of them were gone. The thought of Green, filching cookies like a depressed little kid made me want to laugh and cry at the same time.

"I've been good—last night it was the vegetable lasagna. Funky Man thought it was the best thing he'd ever had."

Funky Man. "Is that our brother?" I asked, wondering at the name.

"Yes—I don't know who he was before he met this "Hollow Man", but he's become Funky Man now." Green's voice was soft, and distressed, and I wondered how hard it must be to see a fellow in a race known for its pride and its power, pulled so low that even humans wouldn't look at him.

"What's he doing now?" I asked, genuinely curious.

"He's huddled in a corner, wearing a terry cloth robe, eating Grace's cookies and watching *House of Mouse* on cable. I don't know when I've seen anybody so happy." And now his voice was warm with affection, and with the satisfaction of seeing someone he cared for contented and well.

"Well then," I murmured, "Of course you have to stay." Green's breath caught then, for some reason, but I was on the verge of losing it completely so I just kept on talking. "Your care package is coming in the Cadillac," I choked out, "You need to let them take care of you, beloved, so you can bring our brother

back to us and be well and strong.”

"You're very good at this whole 'leader' thing you know," he said, and I could tell his voice was choking up too.

"I learn from the best," I managed, and then I fell apart. "Green, I've got to go...Nicky's here—I'll give the phone to him and he can take directions, okay?"

"Beloved..." he said helpless to stop the flood of tears and we both knew it.

"I love you, you're the sun and the moon and the stars and I know you love me too...here's Nicky."

And with that I thrust the phone up at Nicky. Bracken, who had heard most of the conversation, came up behind me, and as soon as Nicky had the phone he scooped me up in his arms and let me come unglued. I struggled out of Bracken's arms, trying to hold myself together, but I had a feeling that the damage had been done. I was tired, I was depressed because Green wasn't coming home, and I had started out the day crying. It was going to be one of those days where it sucked to be a girl because, I could feel it in my throat, any dumb-assed thing was going to set me off into tears again, but I was damned if I was going to go that way without a struggle.

"I've got to check on Ellen Beth," I managed, wiping away my carefully applied make-up with a few swipes of my hand. "Bracken, could you get my back-pack?" He nodded, giving me the space I needed to pull myself together.

Nicky had written down directions and said his goodbyes to Green—private goodbyes, like mine had been, because he loved Green too—and was just cradling the phone. "Nicky—can you come with me?"

Nicky nodded, and we went walking through the great house towards the side levels—they were the ones graced with two stories of wraparound windows, and a staircase that brought them straight to the garage and from there outside, so that they could walk their land and stay strong.

"I'm sorry to pull you out of class, Nick," I said after my (swear to God) last sniffle. "He needs one of us—he needs a connection to the hill, and beloved hands on his skin and all the things we give him, and the hill needs my power..." I trailed off, knowing I was putting this so badly I would probably offend him for life.

"No problem at all, Lady Cory," he said dryly, ignoring all the possible offenses—a character trait that made me love him. I mean...I guess I really did love him, didn't I? The thought dropped in on me like an anvil from heaven, as I prepared to send him away—it was not as much, or the same, as I loved Green and Bracken, but...he'd been inside my body...he was my friend..."I mean," he was saying, "I guess it's my calling in life, right? I make a great battery."

I stopped in my tracks and whirled to face him, suddenly realizing how my own struggles with our binding and Nicky's own bad fortune had affected him, when I had been too blind to see. "You are **more** than a battery," I said fiercely, looking him dead on in his light brown, bird-shaped eyes.

Nicky suddenly looked very wise. "C'mon, Cory," he said gently. "We both know I'll never be your beloved. I'll never be Green's beloved. I'm an obligation. It's just good to have something to give back, that's all."

And I was on the verge of tears all over again, fuck everything and its little dog too. "You're *my friend!*" I said angrily. "Do you have any idea how important that is?"

He was still looking at me, condescension in the angle of his head, in his eyes, and I could tell he didn't.

"Nicky—do you remember when you used to call me, back in the city?" I said on a note of desperation. "Green would call me every sunset, because that's when we missed Adrian the most, and we'd talk for an hour, and then he'd have to go. And then you'd call, about an hour later...and you weren't my lover, and you didn't want anything from me, and there was no pain between us...and we just *talked*. We just *talked* about anything...music and classes and stupid television shows and action adventure movies..." I shook my head. "I **treasured** your phone calls, you stupid dork—they came to mean something to me because you *weren't* my lover, and you still wanted to be around me, and you've seen enough of Cory the Superbitch to know that this is a big fucking deal..." The angle of his head had changed, and I could tell he was listening, and that impassioned me more. "And besides! This thing you're doing with Green—you're taking my love to him in your body—you realize that we both have to love you for you to do that, right? It may not be the kind of love you dreamed about as a little kid, but you're nourishing both of us...and that's an important thing! You know that, right? That you're important to us?" And I was already weak with tears and, goddammit, nothing could stop them. "You couldn't be who

you are to Green and I if you were only a human battery," I said on another snuffle, and suddenly it was Nicky holding me, and not Bracken. His body was slight, and mortal, and small, but he loved me, and he loved my beloved. Everything I'd told him was true, and I gave back his hug with sincerity, and even with the sexual attraction that had bloomed to life the other night, and he returned in kind. Then his mouth was covering mine, and it wasn't a passionate kiss, it was a kiss of friends who happened to be lovers, and it was just right.

He broke away for a moment, and we held the hug. "Thank you, Cory," he said softly. "Don't worry. I'll take care of him for us, okay?"

"Okay, Nicky," I murmured. "I love you—maybe not the way you want, but it's still love."

"It's more than I could ask for," he said back, kindly. He kissed me again, and turned around back down the hall. I watched his slender form walk away, and couldn't help worry about how sad it was, that Nicky hadn't thought to ask for someone to love him the way I loved Green or Bracken—doesn't everybody deserve a beloved? But time was pressing, and I could ask him that when he got back, and for now, right now, Nicky would be okay. And, hey, for the moment anyway, the tears were pushed away.

Sweet's door was still locked, and indeterminate sounds of either grief or love-making were coming through it, so I had to table Ellen Beth's plight for a while. I said goodbye to Nicky, Leah, and Willow (a tall, well, willowy sidhe with pale green skin, silver-brown hair and willow-bark silver eyes), cautioning them to switch drivers often, let Ellis (who was safe in the trunk of the Caddy already) drive at night, and stop if they needed to. I kissed Nicky goodbye again, on the mouth, with tongue, and made sure they all had mine and Arturo's numbers in their cell phones, then shooed them on their way so I could herd us students out the door as well.

As I put my black pea-coat on over my green hooded sweatshirt and gathered the others to me, I told Arturo to call me on my cell phone at school if anything came up. Officer Max came into the living room as we were getting ready to leave and put his hands on Renny's shoulders, pulling her back against him.

"I'll drive too," he offered. "In case you and Bracken need to leave."

I was going to tell him that's not necessary, but judging by the way Renny

was rubbing against him, I figured that she needed more comfort than Bracken or I could give her, and that to Renny, it was probably vital. "Thank you," I said softly, looking at Renny's misery. "That's really awesome of you, Max."

"Any time, Lady Cory," he returned, his mouth quirking up.

At that moment Bracken came in, hauling my backpack and his, and looking at me with narrowed eyes. I wasn't sure what he was mad about until he set my pack down with a thump and a raised eyebrow and said "Go ahead. Lift it up. I dare you."

Between the knitting, the running gear, the four bottles of water, the three textbooks and the binder, it must have weighed around thirty-five pounds. I hauled it up with an "oomph" sound, and was throwing it around my back to catch the other strap when Bracken launched into a monologue of profanity that heated even my cheeks, and plucked the pack off my back. Throwing it up over his own shoulder—the one not carrying his own pack, he finished up with a snort and a "Damned stubborn woman."

"Thank you," I said sheepishly, and he snorted again, and finally we all managed to get out the door.

The day was a blur of note taking and knitting during lectures to stay awake—the latter earned me a couple of dirty looks from professors, but I've discovered I listen better when I knit so screw 'em. At nearly twelve-thirty, I left Bracken in the library—with my back pack, at his surly insistence—and walked to the psyche building where Professor Hallow's office was situated. As I trotted dutifully through the chill sunshine and plentiful shadows, I realized that I'd been dreading this little conversation all day.

Hallow was waiting for me, the promised pizza sitting on his desk still in a box, and I had to laugh.

"You didn't really need to feed me," I said, a little embarrassed, as I sat down.

"I did if I wanted to live," Hallow said back lightly. Then, seriously, "You look like hell, Corinne...Lady Cory. Bad night?"

I grimaced. This was, sadly, probably going to hurt him more than it hurt me. The story of the night came pouring out, and I was right. By the time I had finished up with Green's new friend, and his postponed trip home, Hallow was

pale, and lines of grief had begun to pull at the corner of his mouth and his eyes.

"I'm so sorry," I said at last. "I know that was hard to hear—that's how Jon went out, isn't it?"

Hallow shook his head. "I don't know, actually. I just...I felt him die in my heart. You know how that feels?"

Yes. Adrian had marked twice before he died and once as his soul left his body—any mark like that, like the one between Bracken and I, or between Nicky and I—well, when the person who shared that mark is gone, it leaves a big gaping whole in...everything. Your heart. Your soul. Reality at large. "Yes," I said after a moment. "Yes I know. I'm really sorry you had to go through that. Is there anything we can do?"

Hallow dragged a hand over his face, lost in his own pain, I guess. There was a moment of silence, and I was comfortable with that, with letting him grieve, and suddenly he focused his sharp, cerulean eyes on me. "Very neatly done, Lady Cory," he said after a moment. "You slid right out of your role as patient and right into the role of Lady Protector."

I flushed. "I was just doing what..." I trailed off, uncomfortable with how that sentence was going to end.

"Doing what?" he asked flatly.

"I was just trying to help," I finished with dignity. "I know what your pain feels like—I didn't want you to feel alone."

"You can't feel alone as part of Green's collective," Hallow told me, his eyes growing kind, and I smiled.

"No. That's what's wonderful about it," I agreed, relieved.

"But you have a unique position in the collective, don't you?" he asked, and I almost groaned. I glanced at the wall clock and saw that it was a few minutes shy of the time Bracken to start on his way over.

"Well, I'm neither fish nor fowl, am I?" I asked back. "I just do what anybody there does—I use the Goddess' gifts to help the Goddess' people, right? You know, we're almost out of time..."

"We've got a few minutes yet. You haven't even eaten any pizza!"

"I'm not hungry."

"I'll tell Bracken," he said with a smile, and I snatched a piece of pizza from the box and took a bite. It was Mountain Mike's—and he'd ordered it with meat. My chewing slowed and I savored for a moment. While my mouth was still full, he looked at me curiously and asked, "How old are you, Cory?"

I blinked and swallowed. "Twenty," I said through half a mouthful.

"Wow—you're still a child, even to humans."

"Yeah," I said dryly, and swallowed the rest. "I'm practically a fetus. Can I go now?"

"So how did it feel to be commanding Green's hill last night?" Shit. I guess not. I set the pizza down on his desk, suddenly not hungry in the least and he continued. "Something horrible happens, and everybody turns to you and voila! You've got the answers, and you hope they're right but you don't know. Your *ou'e'hm* is a thousand miles away—how do you feel about that?"

I looked at him blankly, then looked at the clock. Gratefully, I stood, and started to back away. "You know, I've got to hurry out there if I'm going to make it onto the track!" I said brightly, moving towards the door.

"I can freeze the door knob shut until Bracken gets here and knocks it down," Hallow replied sweetly. "It's a legitimate question, Cory. How did you feel about taking over Green's hill last night?"

I needed to be out of here before Bracken got here, I thought, trying to ignore the cold sweat that was making my hands clammy. He'd bitch about me eating, I'd have to go running on a full stomach, everything would fall to hell.

"Can I just go?"

"Answer the question—it's not hard." He sounded all kind and paternal and it pissed me off enough to give him the truth.

"Fucking inadequate, are you happy now?"

"Not yet—one more question before you go." Because I had my hand on the door handle even though it was locked in place.

"Fine," I said, knowing my eyebrows were drawn together and my

expression was totally hostile. "Can I leave then?"

"Absolutely," he promised. "But here's the thing—Green trusts you. Adrian trusted you—he gave his people to you. Hell—even Arturo looks to you. Bracken has literally put his life in the beating of your heart. Why feel inadequate? Why not feel confident?"

I felt tears threaten—it seemed to be a day for them—and I swallowed fiercely. "Because I don't know what they see in me," I whispered at last. "I never have. And I have to get the fuck out of here right the hell now." And like magic the door handle turned in my hand and I was gone, trotting blindly down the hallway, hoping to meet Bracken in the quad so I could get my running gear from him and go straight to the track.

I had just cleared the psyche building, and could see the student union off to my left and the library beyond that when I heard a voice calling my name—my unmarried name, and I was already so entrenched in being "Cory Op Crocken Green" that I didn't know the idiot shouting "Cory Kirkpatrick" was actually talking to me until a meaty hand descended on my shoulder and I was swung around to face the star offensive tackle of my high school football team.

"Cory Kirkpatrick! I knew that was you! Gees—you get deaf since high school?"

"Chuck Granger," I said, feeling dumb. He'd put on a little bit of weight—or lost some muscle—and his complexion had cleared, but he had the same broad features and bland blue eyes that a lot of girls had thought were handsome in high school. His mother and mine were both in the same garden club, I remembered vaguely. I'd been unaware that he knew my name, much less would be able to recognize me across a college campus and then mortally embarrass me by shouting my name in front of two hundred loitering students who were eating in the space outside Kinko's and the pub/cafeteria. A kid in flip flops and cargo shorts—maybe even the same kid I'd seen in the administration building—was staring at us curiously, as though interested in the kind of girl who would make a guy like Granger hunt me down in the middle of a crowd.

"Cory—dude—you didn't even hear me! I didn't know you even made it into college!"

Suddenly I remembered why I hated high school—and the human race in general—before I grew up, got laid, and found out the world was a larger place

than the Chuck Grangers in it. "I had a 3.8 in high school, Chuck—I don't know why that's such a surprise," I said coldly, and he looked blank, and then offered a great courtesy laugh in exchange.

"Hey—you got all cleaned up, Cory. I hardly recognized you across the quad there—how come you didn't hear me calling you?"

There was a sort of leer on his face now, and he was standing uncomfortably close, and abruptly I remembered something else about Chuck Granger: he was a frequent entrée, when the vampires partied at Lake Clementine for food—and although the vamps rolled his mind to help him forget, his free will was still his, and he always (Always! Marcus had said with disgust) always wanted to be fed upon, ravished, sated, by male vampires. This alone wouldn't be a bad thing, certainly not from Adrian's vampires, but when there were no vampires present, he was a self-proclaimed ladies man and the county's most frequent user of the word "faggot." It was hard for the vampires to respect their dinner when it didn't even recognize the truth of its own humanity.

"I'm married now," I said, swallowing past this new info processing through my brain. "It's not my name anymore."

"Shit—I didn't know you were married! My mom didn't tell me!"

I took a step back and Chuck followed, and I looked behind me, hoping Bracken had emerged from the library so I could get away from this guy. "My mom doesn't know yet," I said unwillingly, and to my horror, Chuck bent his head conspiratorially.

"Well, I can keep a secret, Cory—right?" He winked like we were friends and my stomach started to churn.

"Right," I murmured, backing up another step.

"I mean—like, if you could score for me, I could keep a secret for a long, long time." He smiled suggestively, and I stopped backing up so suddenly he almost knocked me on my ass. Abruptly, this totally shit day jumped into Alice's surreal toilet.

"You want me to score?" I couldn't keep the horror out of my voice. "As in drugs?"

"Well yeah—everyone knew you partied in high school—I mean, marriage

doesn't stop the good times from rolling, right?" He was practically drooling in his eagerness for a new connection and I could only be thankful that it wasn't me he wanted because then I *would* be sick.

"Yeah, I partied," I said, because yes, I'd been at parties. "But I never did drugs—I wouldn't know where to find drugs if they were grown in my own backyard."

"Oh, come on Cory—you had the hair, the earrings—I bet you've even got a tattoo...we all knew you were a good lay—just share a little of the party juice, that's all."

I was a good lay? Well, I was, but nobody from high school would know! He was getting closer, and his sweaty, hammy hand was on my arm, and he smelled like cheeseburgers and beer and I had *baaadd* memories about the smell of beer and it wasn't like I'd been all chipper and ready for bear before this asshole accosted me.

"I'm not sure whether to be flattered or nauseated," I said, because (at last!) Bracken had emerged from the behind the DH building, but he hadn't seen me yet, and I was hoping he could just kind of blithely sweep me away before I had to fry this asshole to his last teeny-tiny testicle pube. "But I think I'll settle on horrified," I finished. "Chuck, I never did drugs in high school. I never did guys in high school. And I'm really hoping you'll just apologize and back away and this won't get awkward or anything, okay?"

Chuck's face hardened, and the lines at his mouth became saturnine and bitter, and prematurely old and he grabbed my arm hard enough to leave bruises the next day. "Dammit, Cory, don't hold out on me...I just want some fucking crank, that's all. You're acting all high and mighty and pure when no one who looked like you in high school could be a fucking virgin and all you Goth punks got high. Everyone knows it, so just give me the name of your connection and it will all be copasetic, right?"

My mad came on and I know I started to glow like a fucking lighthouse, but not to mortals. Not to Chuck, and that was when I smelled it. It was faint...like a garbage truck on the next block, but it was there. "Chuck, you're jonesing right now, but it's not for crank, and if you don't let go of me my great big husband is going to rip off your arm and beat you with it, okay?"

And like that, Bracken was right there at my elbow, and Chuck was so

surprised that he not only let go of me but he finally (praise Jesus!) took a step back and out of my face. He turned pale, and suddenly his hands were shaking, and I risked a look at Bracken and noted that his eyes were burning—literally, a golden ember color shot from his irises—and that he'd dropped his glamour to the extent that any mortal who was paying attention could see his curved, pointed ears.

"Glamour, Brack," I whispered urgently.

"Fuck glamour," he said back in a growl, "Who is this asshole and why shouldn't I kill him?" But I noticed that his ears returned to normal and his eyes stopped glowing like a laser.

"He's some jerk from high school who thought I could score him drugs," I said, wearily, because Chuck was backing away quickly, like Bracken was something out of his worst nightmare. "He's jonesing on the Hollow Man too...but he was an asshole before that."

"I'm sorry..." Chuck stammered, and Bracken was suddenly in his face, holding his throat with one large, graceful hand.

"You're pathetic," Bracken said, anger burning through his voice, and probably through his skin as well. "But you're nowhere near sorry enough. If you talk to her again—if you fucking look at her or think of her or imagine her or wonder about her or delude yourself that you're worth the ground she spits on, I'll break you in half and let you live. If you touch her again, I'll break you in half and call your heart through your chest one drop of blood at a fucking time." Bracken released him, and Chuck sat down abruptly, and then scrambled to his feet in the other direction, screaming the one thing he had left in his arsenal as he went.

"My mom'll be thrilled to hear about your wedding, Cory Kirkpatrick!" He jeered, and then was running away from Bracken like a pig running away from wild bronco.

Bracken looked at me, his chest pumping hard with anger, and he reached down and seized my hands.

"Did he hurt you?" he asked roughly, and, Goddess help me, I lied.

"No." I tried to smile with my lie but I don't think I did a good job. "But the look on his face when you grabbed him by the throat was priceless." I stood

on my tiptoes and kissed him then, a reassuring kiss that quickly turned fierce as Brack tangled his hands in my hair and checked my body over. He noticed the bruises when I winced, and stepped away from me to look at my arm and got angry all over again.

"You lied," he said, rubbing my arm gently.

"Baby, you're late for Hallow—we've got to go..."

"I'm early for Hallow," he replied, puzzled. "Why are you out so early?"

"He let me go." Not a lie, exactly.

"Did you eat?" Instant concern.

"I had a bite." Jeez, I was getting good at this. "But I'm okay, right?"

"Are you?" he asked, suddenly so serious, knowing me so well, that I couldn't prevaricate or split hairs.

"He smelled like Hollow Man, Bracken," I said after a moment. "And he shouted my maiden name across the campus. And my meeting with Hallow was...hard. And I need to go. I need to run. Please baby...just let me run?"

Bracken held my hands to his lips, kissed them softly. "You need to run from me?" Hurt.

I shook my head and the first honest smile since I'd gone into Hallow's office stretched my cheeks. "I could never run from you. You'd run and find me and take me home and make love to me until I came to my senses. No, beloved...I need to run from myself."

Bracken nodded—goddess, he was so damned wise sometimes; it was spooky how much he was like Green. "I'd find her too." He bent down and kissed my brow solemnly.

"I look forward to that." I broke away and reached for my pack which was over his shoulder. He reached for his pocket instead and pulled out the plastic bag that had my running gear in it and handed me that instead. I grinned at him. "Come get me on the track, okay? We can walk to our next class..." And then I turned and trotted away, running from myself before I'd even gotten my Nikes on.

BRACKEN

Attractions

I watched her disappear past the library, blending seamlessly into the other young humans wearing sweatshirts and jeans and jaunty little ponytails, and felt completely helpless.

Running from me?

No. Running from myself.

The complete truth. Why would she need to run from herself? Didn't she know she was perfect?

Sourly I looked in the direction that the detestable asshole had run. Of course she wouldn't know—she'd been dealing with people like *him* all her life. I hated this world. Relentlessly I shoved my glamour over my features, but that didn't stop my scowl from scaring people out of my path as I trudged to Hallow's office. Good. I liked being scary.

But when I shoved my way through into the book-crowded room with the ugly green tile, Hallow appeared unimpressed.

"Bad day?" he asked mildly, and I grunted and sat down, wincing as I heard the padded chair beneath me creak under my weight.

"Bad night. And any day here with humans is a bad day." I was starting to get angry all over again when I caught sight of the piece of pizza in the trash can — the one with a single bite taken out of it. My eyes flew to Hallow's, and a pained look crossed his features, and I opened the box that was on the desk and practically snarled.

"Did she tell you she'd eaten?" Hallow asked gently, and I did snarl then with pure frustration.

"Worse. She told me she'd 'had a bite.'" I seethed.

"My—she is getting very good at being just like us, isn't she?"

I growled—no words, just a grumbling, menacing purr that shook the

windows and made Hallow blink slowly in surprise. The meeting went downhill from there.

Twenty-five minutes later I was striding to the track, Max and Renny practically trotting to keep up with me, and Renny was chattering about human conventions or some shit like that and I would have ignored her completely but Max risked death and put his hand on my arm.

I swung around to crush him like a bug, but Officer Max has learned a lot from Green in this last year, and he took a step back, then stood his ground with his hands lowered and waited until he had my complete attention.

"I know you're worried, Bracken," he said gently after a moment during which I reminded myself that Cory would be very mad if I killed her friend, "But storming onto the track and dragging her off is just going to embarrass her and piss her off. At least wait until she's done with her run, and then ask her if you can get her something to eat, okay?"

"It's not like she lied to you..." Renny said unhappily, and I swung away from them both.

Of course she hadn't lied to me. With the exception of telling me she wasn't hurt—which was a lie she tried to make truth so automatically it just leapt off her lips before she even thought about it—she had split hairs...led me on so I wouldn't worry, protected me from her own shortcomings like she was worried I wouldn't love her if I had to help her in any way, shape, or form. I had one real job on Green's hill, and that was to keep her safe, and if I wasn't becoming enthralled and putting her in danger from magic ass-kicking blood, then she was prevaricating her way out taking good care of herself. Didn't she see what she meant to us? Didn't she understand that something as small as skipping lunch was a prelude to grabbing death with both hands?

I was getting ready to do just what Max told me not to do and storm onto the track to confront her when I saw her running. I stopped, just stopped, to watch her. She would never be graceful, I thought—her legs were too short, and even underweight she had flaring hips that were good for walking with purpose, but not for running—but she moved with energy, and a simple human joy of exertion. Her stride had evened out from yesterday, and her breathing wasn't quite as labored. The human girl with the glossy brown hair was next to her, and again it appeared as though her mouth hadn't stopped moving once, but Cory was nodding at her, and smiling, and looking relaxed and absorbed in what the

other girl was saying. When she'd left me, her shoulders had been hunched, her mouth had been tense, and her eyes had been drawn together at the brow.

I sighed, then, easing the tension in my back, and turned towards the bleachers. Our backpacks hit the steps with a loud thump, and Max and Renny visibly relaxed as they saw me sit and stare at Cory making her way around the track, her sneakers pounding out a crisp thudding that I could hear, even though they were on the far side from me.

Renny plopped down next to me and leaned against my shoulder. "She doesn't know how important she is," her voice, always quiet, almost faded away in the wind.

"She knows how important she is to *me*," I replied, my eyes never leaving Cory.

"Not really," Renny corrected. "But she's learning. Give her time to learn."

"Some asshole from high school was..." My whole body snarled, "... hitting her up for drugs when I saw her in the quad. If we were at home, I could have killed him."

Renny pat my shoulder. "If we were at home, I would have helped you. But the human world has always been...unkind...to Cory, to people like her. It's going to take more than a year in our world, even more than a year with Green—and definitely more than two months of fabulous sex with you o mighty man-god—to get past the rest of that crap, okay?"

Max sighed. "On behalf of all stupid humans, I'd like to apologize?"

And Renny surprised us both by turning to him and snapping, "You don't have to stay human and you know it." And with that she left my side and scampered off towards the track, preparing to run with the other girls in her jeans and sneakers.

"Fuck," Max murmured, staring after her unhappily, and I was so grateful not to be the only clueless bastard I knew that I didn't even mind when he sat a companionable distance from me.

"Absofuckinglutely," I agreed, and we just sat for a moment, watching the women we loved run.

It was pleasant and lulling to listen to the wind and the thud of their feet on the track and feel the chill sunshine on our faces. There is a goldness to sunshine in winter, a thick preciousness that makes you long for it, even as it chills you. For a moment, I got to forget that we were surrounded by freeways, just minutes away from a seething sewer of drugs and prostitution, and that I had to go in with Cory to her physics class next—the only course she had every day—and watch her stare at the professor with bewildered desperation because, of all the things she did with ease, physics was just not on the list.

"We don't have rings," I said abruptly, into the silence.

"Hm?" Max just looked at me.

"It's a human convention, isn't it? Wedding rings?"

Max nodded. "Yes. It's not as effective as...as binding yourself to mortality or...or turning furry, but it's all we've got," he sighed.

"She wants to bite you, doesn't she," I stated, suddenly feeling some empathy for Max when I hadn't thought myself capable of it.

"Yeah. Most of me wants to do it," he admitted after a moment.

"What part of you doesn't?" I was suddenly curious. If I had been human, I thought mournfully, I would have taken any way out of the human world I could possibly find.

"The part of me that went to Bible school and sang 'Glory Hallelujah' and meant every word of it." Max sounded sad.

"You can still worship God." I actually turned to him, absurdly touched by his faith. Cory was right. He was a good man—he was just badly schooled. "The Goddess will just want a little respect, that's all."

Max smiled, a smile so sad it could only be human. "Thanks, Bracken," he said sincerely. "That's good to know...shit..." Because something on the field had caught his attention and he was already up and running before I could turn and see that both Cory and Renny had stumbled and Renny had actually gone to her knees.

I didn't think, I *moved*, blurring past Max and arriving at Cory's side before her ass hit the ground, and, holy shit, she looked like she was going to throw up

and I knew she didn't have anything in her stomach to lose.

Renny was clutching her ears and keening when Max arrived. He gathered her up close and tried to shelter her head with his body, and Cory was biting her lips and trying to keep her control. "It's him," she whispered fiercely. "It's him...I don't know where, but he's nearby. He's...pulling at me somehow..."

"Make him stop calling your name!" Renny whined. "He's shouting your name and it hurts!"

"Are they okay?" I looked up at the girl—Davy, wasn't that her name?—and then at Max, who grimaced at me and shrugged.

"PMS," Cory said, with quicker wits under siege than I had on any given day. "I guess our cycles are in sync, because I've got really bad cramps."

I looked at her and blinked. PMS? Cramps? From what?

Renny pulled herself together enough to say, "Yeah—it's my first day—I don't know what I was thinking..." Before murmuring urgently to Max, who turned and started towards the bleachers.

Davy wasn't buying it. "At the same time like that? Really?"

Cory swallowed, hard, and I wondered how long she was going to spend vomiting to pay for her self-control now. "We've been rooming together for seven months. It happens."

"But I thought you were married..."

"She is," I said shortly. "We're all in the same..."

"Boarding house," Cory supplied gamely. "But Davy, I've got to go..." Because I was moving towards our packs already, and the girl was trotting to keep up with me.

"I know—I just want to make sure you're okay..." She cast a sideways look at me, disapproval in the lines at her mouth. "Gees, you were there awfully fast, uhm..."

"Bracken," I supplied.

"Yeah...do you ever let her out of your sight?"

"When I do, she doesn't eat," I said darkly, and had the grim satisfaction of watching Cory cringe.

Suddenly Davy's expression lightened and she stepped in front of me and gave Cory a pat on the arm. "Okay, I'm convinced, you're in good hands," she said brightly. "Isn't it nice to have someone who will kill or die for you, right there at your beck and call?"

Cory suddenly looked very old and very tired. "It's a terrifying responsibility," she said seriously, resting her head against my chest. "Never take it for granted." I picked up my speed then, and left Davy just looking at the two of us thoughtfully, her usual smile nowhere to be seen.

We got the hell out of there, Max moving surprisingly fast while carrying Renny. I had everyone's packs on my back as well as Cory in my arms, and we made good time heading through the quad towards the river-side parking lot, until Cory stopped me urgently in front of a trash can to lose stomach acid because there was nothing else for her to vomit. When she was done Renny said "It's over. Please...let's just sit..."

And so we found a tree and sat, backs to the tree, women on our laps, and caught our breath.

"It was calling your name?" I asked, after the shivering had stopped. Among everything else, Cory kept bottles of water in her pack, and I fished out two of them for the girls. Cory drank and spat, then drank gratefully. Renny sipped delicately, still more cat than girl when faced with crisis.

"It was calling Cory's name," Renny said seriously. "Cory Kirkpatrick of Crocken Green."

"I felt a pull..." Cory admitted, nodding. "But it wasn't strong. It was like...like when Green is willing me to sleep, but usually I can't resist that. This I could turn away from if I wanted to...of course the stench didn't shore up my will any, but it didn't make me all jumping in my pants to answer the call..."

"It knows your name," I said darkly. All the precautions we had taken, and still, it was her name that would do us in.

"Not all of it," Renny murmured. "It knows her maiden name though..."

"Thank you Chuck Granger," Cory snorted with complete disgust. "What a

total waste of skin." Her body shivered again and I tried to gather her in.

"I will kill him," I said sincerely, feeling so good about the thought that I almost forgot that I had been furious with her only a half an hour ago.

"That's not necessary," she said gently, and suddenly she was touching my face, like she was trying to comfort me instead of the other way around.

"Well I have to do something!" I burst out. "I can't *hear* this thing, I can't *smell* it—and if I can see it, it must be doing a spectacular job of hiding from me because I'm as blind as Max whenever it's around. How am I supposed to protect you when I can't even see what's after you? How am I supposed to take care of you when you won't even be honest about whether you're taking care of yourself?"

There was silence then, a grim, uncomfortable silence and I felt horrible because it wasn't like the women hadn't been scared enough as it was. Then Cory spoke up unexpectedly, her voice lighter than it had been. "Bracken?" There was a note of teasing that I couldn't understand.

"Yes." I couldn't look at her for a moment, I was so angry and worried at once.

"You know what would be really awesome right now?" Again, those gentle fingers on my face.

I looked at her, and even my ears were wary. "What?"

"Chicken soup. A really big cup of chicken soup. With some of that cornbread they have at the Roundhouse." She smiled weakly up at me, and I could tell that now, of all times, she was trying to apologize.

"Chicken soup?" I asked blankly. I had no response for this. No response for the apology, no response for the request. Did all human women baffle their human men, or was it just my sorceress, losing her great, clumsy sidhe?

"Yeah. My stomach just wasn't up for pizza today. Would you baby me a little, and get me some chicken soup?"

It really was an apology I thought, seeing the uncertainty on her tired face and her remarkable, green-shadowed-brown eyes trying hard to meet my own gaze. I'd heard worse. I kissed her forehead then, touched my cheek to hers, and

nodded. "Chicken soup?"

"A large," she murmured.

"One for me too!" Renny piped up, and I actually smiled over my shoulder at her.

"Anything for you, Max?" I offered, and the smile the man gave me made me glad I did.

"Chili," he said. "There's something addictive about college campus chili."

I set Cory down gently, propping our back packs around her, and she smiled up at me as I did so. "Thank you, beloved," she said formally, and I swallowed.

"You're always welcome," I murmured, and then trotted off happily to do her bidding.

It was gratifying to watch her eat when I returned, and color come back to her cheeks and her posture become straighter. The smile she gave me when she was done was hale and hearty—the brilliant smile she used without guile or purpose that made all men, including myself, besotted and stupid with love for her.

"The smile was a bit much," I grumbled as I sat on the cold wet grass next to her.

"What smile?" She looked blank, and finally, finally, all my anger slipped away as if it had never been.

"What are 'PMS' and 'cramps'?" I asked then, because I'd been wondering.

Her eyes grew impossibly large in her pinched face, and her mouth opened and closed. Renny broke into a peal of giggles and Max smiled evilly.

"That's my cue to take Renny to her next class," he said with a certain satisfaction. "May the Goddess show you mercy, my brother." And then he stood up and pulled Renny to her feet, and with his arm wrapped around her tiny body, they walked into the green of the quad and were gone.

We sat in the cold winter sunshine for another minute and then Cory stood, stiffly, and offered her hand to me. "I'd pull you over in a heartbeat," I said

wryly, and stood up myself, ducking to keep from hitting my head on the branches of the pine tree that we had been sitting under. Our bottoms were both damp from sitting on the ground in the winter. I swung our packs on my back then moved towards her with purpose.

"I can walk!" she protested.

"I know you can." I scooped her up, ignoring her little squeal of protest. "I can carry you." I took two steps out and turned towards the big new Engineering building where her physics lecture was held. "Now what is PMS, and why would you and Renny get cramps?"

I almost dropped her when she explained it to me. "All human women do this?" I asked, horrified. "You don't!"

"They do when they're healthy and functioning right," she explained patiently. And then, so quietly I almost couldn't hear her. "And I *did*."

I stopped abruptly. "When did you last?"

"Early May," she replied softly. Right before she and Adrian had gotten together. Before her life had changed and her heart had been broken and the world had come apart at the seams. "Sudden weight drops or gains, stress, low or high body fat—they get in the way of the whole thing working right," she tried to explain, but my silence became hot, and then, quickly because she could read my mood better than anybody, she finished with "Please don't get angry all over again, beloved. That's why I started running, because just feeding me wasn't doing it—I figured that if I build muscle and appetite, maybe I'll start putting on weight and you won't have to worry so much, okay?"

I closed my eyes tight and nodded, because I believed her, and her sudden push to exercise made much more sense. She wasn't just doing it for her own health—she was doing it for my—for our—peace of mind. Okay. That was the Cory I knew.

"Besides," She went on gamely, "I'd much rather hear about your talk with Professor Hallow."

I blew out a breath in frustration and suddenly the whole conversation came spilling out of me like the anger I couldn't spill at her because that's not where it belonged. "What's there to talk about?" I asked grumpily. "It was all stupid questions—are you worried about Cory? Well duh! Has he seen you?"

You're all skin and hips! Is it hard to love Adrian's lover? Well that's the freaking easy part, the worst part is that she's just like Adrian and where's *that* going to get me? And do I think Adrian would be okay with us? And why the fuck should I care, the bugger's *dead*, and if he didn't love us enough to hold on to you then I deserve you, now don't I? And how do I feel about Green? Well, shit—how can you not love Green? Do I give a fuck if he's your lover too? What does he take me for, some stupid piss-ant human who doesn't know the goddamned difference between a lover and a car? I mean *Jeeeesus*, how stupid can one elf get? He knows better than that shit, and why he thinks I wouldn't miss Green when he's been the sun in my sky for most of my life is beyond me...what a fucking moron," I finished on a puff of breath, as I sat on the dirty beige tile floor of the physics classroom, and Cory made a suspicious sound against my chest.

"What?" I asked, and she just shook her head, her eyes bright with what looked like laughter, but I couldn't for the life of me figure out what was funny. "No, seriously, what?"

"Nothing," she said, her voice not quite cracking. "It's just good to know that Hallow had better luck with you than with me, that's all."

"Hallow?" Mario asked, coming in to sit in the seat next to me. Mario and La Mark didn't have the same break we did on Tuesdays—in fact, this was the only class besides Hallow's that Cory shared with the two Avians. La Mark took the desk on the other side, and I stayed on the floor—those little human sized desks just didn't do it for me, and I couldn't hold Cory if I was sitting in one. "How was Hallow, by the way? I mean..." Mario grimaced. "I may be an Avian, but, I'm, like, Mexican...we don't do therapy—we leave that for you white people, right?"

"Apparently the whiter you are the better you do," Cory quipped gamely, giving me another one of those bright-eyed glances.

"Bracken?" Mario replied, his voice teasing, "Man, that boy don't need therapy...give him a tree to beat up, and he's just fine—he's all emotions, all on the surface, aren't you, Brack?"

I thought about my outburst to Cory, and flushed. "The sidhe think repression is a silly human thing," I said with dignity, and Cory touched my shoulder in such a way that for a moment it felt like just the two of us in a room full of bored students.

"It is, sweetie," she said softly, "But leave us our little quirks, okay?"

"You people have too many quirks," I replied gently, and then the professor came in and we all dutifully took out our notebooks and began to copy what he put on the board.

Cory fell asleep about halfway through, her head leaning against my shoulder heavily until her hand fell into my lap and her notebook slid to the floor. I took her notebook, filled with cramped notes in her bizarre and tiny handwriting, and filled in the rest of the lecture, clarifying what the professor left out, drawing diagrams that would help her understand all the things he assumed she knew but that she obviously didn't, and generally doing the man's job for him. He was a tall, angular man with a scant nest of grey hair and a beige plaid shirt tucked into a pair of khaki's that were pulled over his rounded stomach, and he kept casting dirty looks at me as I wrote.

"You should wake her up," he said at one point, interrupting his own sentence. "She needs to hear this."

"I'm taking notes," I replied mildly, wondering if the man was blind to the fact that I could squash him like a ripe plum under my (ugh!) shoe.

He bent down, putting his face offensively close to Cory's and said "Hello...young lady...you need to..." He trailed off because I lowered my face between them, and glared at the man.

"She's sick," I said abruptly. "She's sick, and she needs to sleep, and my notes will do," I growled, and something must have frightened the man because he backed away quickly and nervously resumed his lecture from across the room. I heard La Mark whisper "Glamour, Brack." And for the second time that day repaired my disguise in the human world.

Finally—finally! Class ended, and as I shifted both packs on my back and pulled Cory into my arms and began to stand, she started to wake up. "I can walk," she murmured groggily. I ignored her.

"What's the deal?" La Mark asked. We stood, waiting for the rest of the class to filter out the door. The professor was packing up his notes and looking at me uneasily—I shot him a glare and then turned my attention to La Mark and said quietly, "The Hollow Man was at the track today. I didn't see him, but he was calling Cory's name and he pretty much took Renny out too."

"How?" Mario asked seriously. "Because in the middle of class the two of us heard this sound like fingernails on a chalkboard that almost made us black out..."

"That's how..." I replied. We were out in the hallway now, and suddenly I felt a hand on my shoulder. I turned around, surprising Mario who didn't know where I was going and confronted a human male in a hooded sweatshirt with cargo shorts and what Cory called flip-flops. I looked at his face and had a momentary impression of older than he looked, before I had to squeeze my eyes shut against a dizziness that made me stumble. Mario put a hand on one shoulder, La Mark on the other, and that steadied me enough to say, "I'm sorry? Did you need something?"

"Yeah, man..." I couldn't see the color of his eyes, I thought. He should be pretty...enormously pretty, attractive enough to pull at me, although I hadn't been drawn to a man since I'd licked Cory's blood from a vampire's fangs when he'd blooded her in front of me...but... this was not a good, clean attraction...it was...strong, and steamy and too sweet...repellent...like a lover that had stayed too long in rank sheets..."I thought it was really great, the way you got into Prof Dann's face like that...I mean, he was being a total prick..."

As he spoke, Mario and La Mark both groaned, moving their hands from my shoulder and covering their ears in pain, and I was still lost in the hollow that was his eyes, mesmerized, besotted, bespelled by what wasn't there to see...and then Cory made a horrible, retching sound in my arms, and I found I *could* focus on something else besides the boy in front of me as she struggled so hard that I dropped her and she fell to her knees, one hand on the ground, one hand out in front of her, glowing with power.

"Christ, it's him!" she shouted, and another wave of dizziness washed over me, but this time I fought it, because there she was, crouched on the floor between me and our enemy, and I was damned if I'd let her fight this battle alone.

Mario and La Mark were suddenly not there, big predatory birds in their place, screeching at full volume to drown out the sound of Hollow Man's voice and I saw a glow in his eyes and had enough presence of mind to shout "*Shield!*"

The glow in Cory's hands extended, attenuated, glowed brighter, like electric Plexiglas between us and our enemy, who stood, glaring at us through the crackle of her power, and he held his hand out to me, and suddenly I, who

was a red-cap, and who could call blood at will, felt my own blood respond to someone else's calling. I retaliated by throwing my own hand out in front of me, and at the moment I felt his call recede, I had the satisfaction of seeing surprise on his face as I called blood on my own.

"Nah nah..." Called the Hollow Man, one hand still out for my blood but the other now clutching his chest and wiping at the blood starting from his eyes. His voice was...small, I thought with a distant part of my brain, and as though it wasn't coming through his throat... but there was no time to puzzle at why..."Remember what my blood does to your people."

"Cory, how good is that shield?" I shouted over the sound of powers colliding, and as a response she held her free hand behind her. I slapped my free hand into hers, there was a surge in the sound of crackling, and she responded, "It's fucking invincible." Just to be sure I spat, watching with satisfaction as my spittle sizzled on the wall of luminous blue in front of me.

"Your blood will never touch us," I told him grimly, and then screamed with exertion and joy, because my power is a joy, and there was an explosion from the Hollow Man's chest that landed with a splash, a thump, and a sizzle on Cory's shield.

"Eww!" Cory made a face as the Hollow Man's burnt orange heart thudded against the shield her arms length from her face and burst, and then she screamed in anger as the blood began to spark and flare orange against her shield, the two elements dancing in a fight for space and dominance. "Oh that's the fucking end!" she hollered, and the shield glowed brighter blue, then green, then white, and when it turned white, I felt my own strength tapped. Suddenly Mario and La Mark were human, one on each shoulder, bearing me up, and Cory hadn't stopped swearing, but that was okay because we were winning, dammit, she was winning, and the Hollow Man was glaring at us with unconcealed evil. The terrible hole in his chest and his abdomen were both dripping orange viscera, a stark testament to the obscenity of his existence.

And then the last crackle faded, and it was over, Cory's strength intact and the blood destroyed, cooked, cauterized so cleanly off her shields that there wasn't even vapor to testify to its existence.

"Stay away from our people," Cory ordered grimly, and I could feel her body readying for yet another charge. She was building power to fire, I thought with surprise. All of that, as exhausted as she was, and she was getting ready to

wipe this fucker out of existence. But she needed time, after the battle with the poisoned blood, time to ready herself, time to charge, time to make sure we were safe as she fired.

"Someday, you will be alone..." The Hollow Man spoke, but it was not the young student's voice anymore. It wasn't a sepulchral wail but it had a grating timber to it that worked its way up the soles of our feet and felt like sandpaper in our joints, and Cory's charging became more purposeful. "Someday, you will be alone, and I will be there..." And as she drew in a breath and pulled back her power shoulder to throw, he was gone, destroyed body, grotesque blood, hellish (and still small) voice and all; he had burst into smoke so thin and acrid that only Cory's shield protected us, and not even the belated power ball she threw at the place where Hollow Man had been could destroy it.

I fell to my knees behind her, our hands still linked, and Mario and La Mark with me. Together we sat, panting, on the floor of the afternoon-empty hall, surveying the blackened space on the far wall of cinderblock where her last burst of power had crashed, at less than full strength.

"Fuck," Cory whispered, "I must be slipping—that wall should be toast."

"You were still charging," I said, although she knew that. She expected too much from herself.

"Nice work with the whole blood thing..." she said, still kneeling on the floor in front of me, her hand wrapped around her back to clench mine. "I've never seen you work as a weapon before."

"Definitely glad you're on our side," La Mark said from my left, and I grunted a thanks.

"So..." I said, letting go of Cory's hand and standing with an effort, "Did anybody get a look at the bastard's face?"

"Yeah..." Mario said, "He was an average college white boy...even when his chest exploded and he got all Exorcist on us...you were looking right at him."

"More than average..." La Mark said regretfully, confirming my initial impression of uncommonly pretty.

"I couldn't see him...he was...like his name...hollow, no substance, his

eyes led nowhere," I murmured, bending down to shoulder the packs, which had slid off my shoulders when Cory had struggled out of my arms.

"Well, that makes sense..." La Mark murmured. "The vampires can smell him, the weres can hear him, the fey can see him for what he is..."

I cringed. The vampires could smell him, and Cory had been face to face with him...the sound was unmistakable, and now I knew why she had kept her face turned away and stayed on her knees while we spoke. So much for chicken soup.

"Goddess..." I swore, and dropped the packs with a thump. I was mortally tired of hauling the fucking things around anyway. I reached down and yanked her backwards, away from the mess that had spattered at her knees, then pulled out a bottle of water and ripped off a part of my T-shirt from under my sweater with a jerk, and began to clean her up.

"Do you have any idea how tired I am of barfing?" she asked wearily. "Probably almost as tired as you are of cleaning me up."

"The smell is that bad?" La Mark asked. Unbidden, he had run to the nearest drinking fountain and filled up one of the empty bottles that had rolled from her pack. She took it and drank gratefully.

"The smell is that bad," Cory affirmed, nodding and trying to stand up. She wobbled for a moment, and then, looking purposeful, put her hand against the wall. I sighed and went to pick up the packs again, but to my surprise I found the two Avians had beat me to it.

"Even you are looking tired, oh mighty warrior," Mario said dryly, "Although I think it would serve her right if we dumped the knitting out of Cory's pack because it's hellaciously heavy."

Cory, who had been trying desperately to stand still and focus her eyes, suddenly snapped a glare at Mario. "I can still singe your tail feathers, bird boy," she threatened. "That sweater will be finished by the time my shift's over tonight, and if you want to live you'll leave it where it is!"

"We're not working tonight," I said firmly, scooping her up. On days like this I was so used to her weight in my arms that I felt naked without her.

I watched her sort through several retorts to that—the first, of course was

that she was fine and could work. The second would have been that Grace needed us. But then her eyes fastened on my face, and her hand came out to pull my shaggy bangs out of my eyes, and she smiled tiredly. "Of course. You're right. Grace can find others to work—I'll finish the sweater at home."

Mario just said I looked tired. Obviously, the only way to get her to take care of herself was to let her take care of me.

"He knows who we are now," Cory murmured, still trying to reason things out in my arms. "Thank you Chuck Granger. But we hurt him, I think. Maybe, while we try to find a way to fight him, we'll be safe..."

"As long as we stay together," I muttered.

"Oh good," she said brightly, "Couples counseling—Hallow will love that!"

"If it doesn't drive him nutsy-cuckoo," Mario said with a laugh.

"Serve him right if it does," I murmured, and together we emerged into the thin, late sunlight, where Max and Renny were waiting, wondering what had kept us.

NICKY

The Rules of the Road

"I love you, Nicky. Maybe not the way you dreamed as a little kid, but its still love."

The words haunted me. *She* haunted me. Every day, I lived with her, I talked to her, I even made plans to touch her, to hold her, to be inside of her, and it was still like living with a dream. And every time I see the way Bracken looks at her, or the way Green smiles at her only, or hear the timbre of their voices when they say the word 'beloved' it becomes obvious, so painfully obvious, that I may be fucking fabulous as a friend, but that I am not even in the running as a lover. How could I measure up to the two of them? How can anybody?

And it's not like she led me on. She treated me with respect, and friendship, but she was very careful not to touch me, even casually, so that I would maybe, just for a moment, hope that she could love me. Not even hope.

There were times when I knew she wouldn't have minded a hug, or a kiss, or even, when she and Bracken were fighting and Green was with someone else, a spare bed. But she wouldn't come to me—she wouldn't ask to come to me, because that would be too much like using me, and that love she was talking about is real, although it makes me bitter sometimes, and you don't use a friend.

So her words haunted me, and that sweet kiss we had shared, and her obvious distress that I wouldn't know she valued me and the way she loved Bracken enough to call him names and fight with him but she won't even let herself hold my hand.

And I missed Green too, so much that I couldn't breathe, and less than two months ago, I'd been as homophobic as the next redneck and how could I reconcile the Montana farm boy with the sex-happy maniac in Green's bed when I couldn't get Cory to look at me as a man at all?

It was all roiling around in my head as I drove the sky blue Cadillac. Leah was singing loudly to Sheryl Crow on the radio while Willow slept on our luggage in the back, and suddenly Leah stopped singing and looked at me.

"What the hell has got your panties in a knot?"

I blinked, and looked away from the glory that was I-5. "Not a blessed thing," I said sourly, and returned my gaze to the road, but Leah hadn't finished with me yet. She was a very pretty girl, with long black hair and with eyelashes so thick and dark that her brown eyes didn't need any make-up, but I was a bird and she was a were-puma and that steady, unblinking gaze was really unnerving. Suddenly she nodded, as though figuring something out.

"You're horny," she said abruptly, and then started humming to the music again.

Well, I was. Green was gone, date night was a week ago—yes, I was horny. "So what?"

"Nobody on Green's hill goes horny," she stated. "It's the one thing we don't have to worry about, which is good because the whole rest of our lives are pretty fucking complicated. You're horny, and you're complicating things and it's making me crazy. Willow and I will fuck your brains out at the hotel. 'Kay Willow?"

"Wonderful," Willow purred from the back, and I almost swerved off the

road. I didn't know she could talk. "Can I lick his phallus? Humans taste so good down there...even were-creatures. Can I lick you too Leah? Soooo good..." And dreaming about multi-human orgies, Willow fell back asleep, I guess, because we didn't hear from her for a while.

"I can't do that," I said evenly, trying to ignore the hard-on I got just from thinking about it. Would Ellis join in too? A part of me wondered, and I mentally cursed myself for adding that thought, because I loved making love to Cory, but playing with Green's body had made me appreciate men too, and on the whole my cock was hard in my pants and I had a good six-hundred miles to go before we rested, and I could jack myself off to relieve the pressure.

"Of course you can," Leah frowned. "It's not like Cory and Bracken, where somebody will turn into mushy goo, right?"

"No—nobody will turn into goo," I said dryly. Leave it to Leah to take something as painful as Cory's binding with Bracken and make it that breezy and simple.

"Then why can't you get laid?" She wasn't blinking again, and I found myself thinking about it for the first time.

"My people are monogamous," I said after a moment. "We're raised to believe you get a mate, and you do your best to make it work, and if you can't, you still make it work because your mate has to like you enough to fuck you once a moon or you die."

"I get that," Leah said, nodding her head earnestly at me from across the seat. "But this is different. Your mates can't be monogamous. They don't *want* to be monogamous—and that's no slam on you Nicky, and certainly no slam on them. I mean, Adrian brought Cory home last summer, and we knew—the whole freaking hill knew that she'd be, like, our lighthouse, you know? Brilliant, beaming in hope and strength, and that Adrian and Green would be drawn to her like really big, beautiful moths. Some of us even guessed that Bracken loved her too. Loving Cory, loving Green—that's just a sign of your good taste, really. And believe me, I've slept with practically everybody at the hill *but* Cory, I can tell you something about taste, good and bad."

"Bracken?" I asked, curious. He was so beautiful—too beautiful to have been celibate for any length of time.

"One night, I got Bracken *and* Adrian," she said dreamily. "It was like being cooked on the rocks of passion, if you can buy that corny-assed metaphor..." She giggled at her own pun, and I smiled a little too. What can I say? I've been raised with the same porn as every other American boy...I just had to keep telling myself that it wasn't for me.

"Did they do that a lot?" I asked, perversely curious. In a way I was already sharing Cory with Bracken and Adrian. I was just wondering if they made a habit of it, that was all.

"Mmm..." Leah sighed, then opened her eyes and looked sideways at me. "No—they either competed for women or banged each other silly. It was sort of as a favor to me, I guess."

"How do you mean?" What I really wanted to ask was if they were as passionate together as Bracken and Cory, or Cory and Green, but I thought that a yes to that question would have been more than I could stand.

Leah sighed, and shook back that amazing black hair. "Do you have any brothers or sisters, Nicky?"

I shook my head. "No...I think Mom and Dad wanted more, but..." I shrugged.

"I had a little brother," Leah said, and my heart stopped at the word 'had'. "Mikey—he hated it when I called him that, but I was six years older, and I just had to rub it in."

"What happened?" I asked into the sudden sadness.

"Leukemia," she said quietly, "When he was ten. Mom and dad left me at home at night to go to grief counseling, and I stayed home and got high."

"I'm sorry," I said sincerely.

"Oh, don't be—I laid half the county that year," Leah laughed. "Mom and dad came home early one night, caught me pulling a train with the basketball team. I'd taken a half a bottle of valium and a fifth of whiskey—by the time they got home I was passed out and being banged in my own barf."

"Oh God...that's awful!" I said, horrified. Poor Leah—all that grief, nowhere to go but down. Great, another pun.

"Yeah—they took me to the hospital and got my stomach pumped. While I was there, dad brought my suitcase to the hospital room and told me that he and Mom were not prepared to deal with an incorrigible daughter. He cut me a check for five thousand dollars and said I was on my own."

And now I was too shocked to have anything to say at all.

"By the time Adrian saved me I was one hit away from being a total crack-whore."

"Adrian saved you?" It was an odd choice of words.

"Haven't you heard about Adrian's saved?" Leah asked, legitimately curious. "Half the were-cats and three quarters of the vampires are people Adrian saved. You see...the thing with Adrian was...he didn't care how far down you'd been—he just saw how high you could go...I mean, we had one conversation...one. He made love to me—not fucked, not banged, not drilled. Made love. Swear to the Goddess, it was my first time ever. And then he asked me the first time I got high. I told him it was after my brother's funeral, and suddenly, for the first time since Mikey died, I found I could cry on someone, you know? And then he said—I'll never forget this—he said *"The drugs are killing you, luv. You're too good a person to go out that way."* And then I really did cry, because my body was screaming for a hit even as he said it, and he didn't mention the sex, and he didn't give a damn how many people I'd banged, he just cared that I was killing myself. That's when he gave me the choice, vampire or were-creature—at first I didn't believe him, but he bared his fangs and grew his feeding face—although he didn't feed from me, because my blood was too screwed up, and I believed."

So he really did save them, I thought, suddenly feeling gratitude for Adrian, my rival, Cory's first beloved. In that moment, I understood why his death could send the entire hill into a tailspin of grief. Before I had only blamed him for leaving the people he loved. Now I knew more of him.

"Why a were-puma?" I asked, and Leah smiled. Even from the side of the car I could see that smile, and, another revelation, I knew with everything in me what Adrian had first seen in Leah, because if she had smiled at him like that, even strung out and stoned, he had to have known what was inside.

Leah's smile faded after a moment, and as she finished her story, I heard the grief that it had taken drug addiction and the loss of her humanity to expose.

"After Mikey's first round of chemo, all his hair fell out and he was getting teased at school—one day I went to walk him home and these kids were all around him, yelling names, and I just lost it...started beating the snot out of the little bastards, you know? So Mikey started calling me wildcat after that—when Adrian gave me the choice, it was the only thing I wanted to be."

"It was a good choice," I said quietly. I was glad she was talking to me—as sad as her story was, it was good to connect with another human being. It seemed sometimes that my whole world was wrapped up with Green and with Cory. It was a hard sphere to travel in. As much as Green loved us all, he was a god, a real living, breathing picture of beauty whose every touch felt like the hand of grace. As much as Cory thought she was just a town-kid whose life had taken a left turn, there was something bright and shining about her—something that drew men and man-gods around her like roses drew baby's breath. For all the tragedy in Leah's life, she was real and earthy and true. Cory dazzled me. Leah just made me happy to listen. Besides, I sighed, gazing ahead at the dreary gray sky and the long straight shot of I-5 through rock and cow country, the stretch of country from Bakersfield to Pasadena was as boring as watching the weather channel without a picture.

"It works for me," she grimaced. "Of course I had a little trouble making relationships work in the first few months."

"What was the trouble?" I asked, genuinely curious. I'd always been other-than-human. What did it take to adapt?

"I kept trying to have them," she laughed, but it wasn't a happy sound.

"I don't understand." But I think I did.

"I didn't get the total 'no shame' thing, you know? I thought 'no drugs, no sex unless it meant something'—you know, whole new me. The trouble was, I didn't even like sex—now that I was having it sober, it was pretty meaningless, unless I was in cat form, and there weren't that many straight pumas out there who wanted a piece of this pussy, if you know what I mean."

I rolled my eyes. Puns—she was good at them. "So..."

"So...that's where Adrian and Bracken came in...after our night together — and a couple with Green, I sort of realized that I didn't *love* love any of them — not the way...hell, name an actual couple at Green's hill, and you know what

I mean. But I cared about them, and they cared for me, and *damn...*the things they could make my body want. Anyway, I figured out that unless it was the right person, it could just be pleasure, and that as long as it really *was* pleasure, it just wasn't bad."

I nodded. I understood the theory, I thought, feeling like a virgin, but did not yet have the practice. "Why not Adrian and Green?" I asked.

Leah snorted, and suddenly I felt her hand on my thigh, and realized that she had moved over one on the Caddy's big bench seat. I breathed deep and smelled cat-in-heat and cinnamon perfume, and I almost saw spots as all the blood in my big head went flooding to the smaller one.

"You know why," she breathed softly, seriously. "You've been with Green and Cory—what did it feel like?"

I closed my eyes against the memory, opened them again and auto-piloted through the gray flatness of central California. "I felt like a pagan, trespassing on holy land," I said thickly.

"Yeah," Leah murmured, and her hand traveled up my thigh, found my hard-on, gave it a gentle squeeze and I sucked in a breath.

"I don't know if I can..." I said, but my voice was high and squeaky, and I was betting that I could in about thirty seconds flat, if my cock was bare and her dark lips were wrapped around it.

"You have to, Nicky," Leah said seriously, still touching my thigh. "You keep looking to Cory like she will look back at you the same way one day. She won't. She's our leader, the Queen of our hill, and the Goddess custom made her for the job. And she *loves* you—but not like she loves Bracken. Not like she loves Green. And you should be glad of that—because I've seen how intense she gets, with either one of her beloveds. She would scorch you and cut you and you wouldn't know which wound to tend to first."

I felt tears start at my eyes, and not from the pain in my crotch, either. "But I will always love her..." I said, feeling like a total pussy. And not either of the kind Leah had been referring to.

"Of course you will, Nicky." Leah was leaning her head on my shoulder now, and her fingernails were tracing my zipper with deliberate provocation. And so help me, I wanted her. Goddess, I wanted *anyone* who wanted me

without reservation or remorse. "But has she ever led you on? Has she ever, once ever, let you believe that you could be what Green is to her? What Bracken is? What Adrian was?

I love you Nicky. Maybe not the love you dreamed of as a kid, but its love just the same.

"No," I said, and this time a real tear fell, trickling down my cheek, splashing on her hand as she fondled my cock through my jeans. "She wouldn't want to hurt me by lying."

"No she wouldn't," Leah agreed, leaning in to lick a teardrop as it pooled in the corner of my mouth. "She's a good person. And she wouldn't want you pining away for her, and she wouldn't want you sacrificing any chance at all of finding the right person—or even a person for right now—because of a misguided sense of monogamy that even Cory can't hold to."

"I would feel...unfaithful..." But her clever fingers had undone my fly, and my zipper with it, and my cock was there, covered by silk boxers that Green had bought me for Christmas.

"Then tonight, before we break at the hotel, call her up and ask her," Leah said throatily, and I whimpered as her fingernail scraped at the ridge of my hypersensitive head through the cooling silk. "But right now, pull over in that dirt turnout and I can take care of your little problem before you wreck the Cadillac and kill us all."

I didn't argue that the only person who'd be in real danger in a car crash was Ellis, and that was if the trunk popped open. I didn't argue that technically oral sex was still sex. I didn't even protest that maybe I should call Cory *right now*. Because Leah was right. Everything I was to Cory, everything I needed for myself, everything I learned from Green, all of it would be made better if my body, at least, was sated and pleased before I looked to them for my happiness. And Goddess, I wanted Leah's lips on my cock, almost as much as I wanted Cory to love me.

I veered off the road in a cloud of dust, bumping enough to wake Willow and make Ellis' body thump in the back as we peeled into the turnout. As the car fishtailed to a stop and I fixed the brake with my foot, Leah pulled my jeans to my hips and engulfed my prick with her mouth and suddenly I was coming, coming so hard I saw stars behind my eyes and groaning with lost innocence and

lost dreams and with the simple animal pleasure of lust and promise of love that had replaced them.

Leah laughed then, swallowing, wiping my come off the corner of her mouth with a red tipped finger and then sat up, kissing me on the mouth and I tasted myself on her lips.

"Call Cory tonight," she whispered, as I reached for her breast through the tightly buttoned red silk shirt she was wearing. "But live for the moment and fuck me right now..."

"Oh good..." I heard from the back seat as Willow woke up. "A rest stop. I haven't tasted sex in at least eight hours..." She giggled giddily and did something to the front seat that rolled it flat and almost even with the back. Her hands came over my shoulders, knocking me into her lap, and her silver green breasts were bare and pointed with brown and I needed to taste that elfin flesh, to feel it between my lips and teeth. I turned awkwardly and as I did so, Leah stripped my pants down to my ankles and pulled off my shoes, and in the time it took me to suckle on Willow, feel her nipple explode into my mouth and her hands clench in my hair, my body was exposed, cooling in the open air. Then I wasn't cold anymore. I was covered and hot with lips and with soft hands and I was lost, found, disappearing, becoming...becoming sex and flesh and dreams.

CORY

A Little Taste of Family

"What in the blue fuck happened to you two?" Grace asked as Bracken crashed gracelessly through the front door into the living room. I had felt his strength flag as he'd carried me up the stairs, but I'd stopped protesting that I could walk since the parking structure at school when he'd barked that my very bitching was making him tired.

"Shitty day," I murmured against his chest, holding my hand there to reassure my self that his heart was beating in his body, and that we were still alive.

"Yeah...a few rude professors, a lost notebook—just a run of the mill crap day," La Mark muttered with his trademark sarcasm.

"Hey—I flunked a pretest!" Mario protested ingenuously as he moved down the hallway to drop our packs in our room.

Bracken flopped into the white brocade couch which groaned under our combined weights, and grunted, "Don't forget a little 'session' with Hallow." And I wasn't sure if he was being sarcastic or sincere, and that alone made me giggle.

"Yeah, yeah..." Grace muttered, and I could hear her eyes rolling as she made kitchen sounds behind us. "So if I feed you, will somebody be able to give me a straight answer?"

"Grace, how come you always manage to feed us?" I asked, suddenly curious. "I mean...you've got a billion and six things to do...I love your cooking, but can't somebody else do it?"

"I like cooking," Grace protested mildly. "Besides, all I really do is prepare big portions of meat to cook—the nymphs and sprites take care of all the veggies and pasta—they know my recipes. I only actually make plates for my own children, little Goddess," she said gently, and she must have worked in hyper-speed because she moved forward with a plate of roast beef and potatoes for me and veggie lasagna for Bracken, and we had practically just walked through the door. "Bracken my darling, you're going to have to put her down if she's going to eat this."

Bracken opened one eye and said "Not if all she's going to have is a bite."

I wiggled out of his lap and scowled at him. "I apologized already! How long are you going to make me pay for that?"

He sat up completely and actually graced me with a bitter smile. "As long as it keeps making you eat," he said smugly, and I took the plate from Grace gratefully and stuck my tongue out at him. He wagged his eyebrows at me, I rolled my eyes and we declared a truce and started shoveling food in our mouths.

"Thank you, Grace," I said through a full mouth, then swallowed. "And thank you doubly for fixing my plate." Because she'd said that she really only waited on her own children, and that made me one of her own. It wasn't a small thing.

"My pleasure," she murmured, winking kindly at me. She handed a plate to La Mark then one to Mario and they took a spot on the dark green couch across from us, then she sat down on stuffed chair across from us and put her

elbows on her knees. "Now, before I call someone to take your places at the store tonight, tell me what happened."

"Hollow man," we all said together through full mouths. Bracken set some sort of speed record for chewing so he could say "You eat, I'll talk." And then he launched into a pithy explanation of the day's attacks.

When he'd finished talking I was still sawing away at roast beef, and Grace looked at me and said, "Well, do you have anything to add?"

I took a bite and chewed thoughtfully before answering. "He left out the waste of skin and water that shouted my maiden name across the quad," I said with a shrug. "That's one of the reasons Hollow Man could pull such a whammy on us at the track—he knew part of my name—it gave him enough strength to knock me and Renny off guard. Hey—where *is* Renny?" Because she and Max had left in Max's Mustang right as we'd left. They should have been here by now.

"She called to say she was staying with Max," Grace said, and we raised meaningful eyebrows at each other. We'd been prophesying for some time that the two of them would have to weather a huge storm if they were going to make it together, and based on what Renny had been trying not to say in front of Davy today, I'd put money down that the storm had arrived. "Who shouted your name?" Grace asked, jerking me back to the big bad guy.

"Some jerk-off I knew from high school..." I frowned, looked at Grace. Grace mostly fed from the weres, but she kept a maternal eye on our people so she might know. "You've heard the guys talk about Chuck Granger?"

Grace thought about it, nodded. "Yeah—they hate him. Apparently his blood's pretty tasty but..."

"But he's an ignorant redneck who uses the word faggot like we use the word 'brother'." Phillip said nastily, coming out from the hallway. "Why?"

"Because he smells like Hollow Man," I said grimly, and Phillip whistled.

"That's bad," he said thoughtfully.

"Yeah—really is. So, how often was Chuck dinner?"

Phillip shrugged. "We all take turns snacking on him...the men I

mean...he's just so sad. He waits for us. He doesn't know who we are, or what we do, but...but he'll stay out at the lake late into the night, and past the season when it's warm...because he remembers that he likes to party with us and I think..." Phillip shrugged.

"The only time he gets to express his sexuality is with the vampires," I finished, feeling like Hallow, and Phillip nodded.

"He probably has some sort of residual memory of being...I don't know. Happy and free, I guess," he said. "Like I said—just sad."

"I'd feel worse for him if he hadn't just given part of my name out to the Hollow Man," I said dryly, and Phillip's eyes widened. The vampires and shape-shifters were very cognizant of the whole 'name is power' thing, at least on our hill. The sidhe were so much more powerful than the turned humans that the first thing a were or a vamp was taught (after stay out of the sunlight and don't kill anyone, of course) was to hide their names—things needed to be kept fair, after all. There was a reason why we all knew each other on a strictly first name basis. All except for me—everybody had been so intent on seeing the me I had been hiding, the me I still didn't know was there, that they had forgotten the danger of letting the wrong people know who you were.

"Well, that's a recipe for disaster," Phillip prophesied grimly, and I nodded.

"I'm sure there's a way we can fight it," I said, looking regretfully at my last piece of roast beef. "I mean—it wasn't that strong, really. If I was ready for it, I could fight it no problem." I popped the roast beef in my mouth and the room grew quiet for a moment. I finished chewing, swallowed, and added, "But we need to find some way to make us safe from his ability to...to level us at one blow. Hey...actually..."

"What?" Grace asked, taking mine and Bracken's plates from us. She gestured to the kitchen to ask if I wanted more, but I shook my head no. I was still hungry from using all that power and then puking up, but now I was so damn tired I didn't think I could chew. She nodded and disappeared for a minute.

"I need to take more vampire blood tonight," I said, nodding decisively, then I spoiled that by yawning. "The vampires I've blooded with didn't go down nearly as hard as those I haven't yet—we can think of some way to drown out his voice for the weres, but for now we have a way to protect the vampires and we have to use it." I yawned again and opened my eyes wider to try to stop doing

that.

"Nap first," Bracken said grimly behind me, and I would have fought him, truly and honestly, but his head had tilted back to the couch and his eyes were half closed, and suddenly I didn't think I could make it off the couch.

"For just a minute," I conceded. I blinked sleepily at Phillip. "I'll be up around...what time is it now?"

"'Bout 6:00—sun sets at 5:28," he answered promptly.

"I'll be up around..."

"You'll be up when you're ready," Grace said briskly, and then she was taking off my shoes and swinging me around so I was lying with my head in Bracken's lap, and doing the same thing for Bracken and pulling up the recliner so he could stretch out as well. I fell asleep so quickly I don't remember if I came up with a timeline or a plan or not.

I'm not sure how long I had been asleep, but when I woke the room was empty of everyone but me and Bracken. I yawned groggily and realized that what had awakened me was a small, compact body climbing up my middle and making itself comfortable between my butt and the back of the couch. I blinked my eyes open and it occurred to me that I knew this little person.

"Graeme?" I asked uncertainly.

"Yeah—you're the pretty girl who said the F-word. My mommy didn't want me to play with you but Grace who-we're-not-supposed-to-call-grandma said that you'd guard us with your life, and that Arturo would too, and that my mom should either get over her prejudices or go back home."

Ouch. "So you get to play with me after all?" I asked, still partly asleep.

"Yes—and you look fun—you made the whole store glow the last time I saw you—can you do it again?"

As if! "I'm sorry—I already made my school glow today, and it's kind of exhausting. Maybe we could do something else." Inspiration. "Do you like movies?"

The little face with its dark-red hair and brown freckles lit up with its own glow, looming above me from the perch on my hip. "We've been staying in a

hotel this week since mama came down to see Grace. I miss my TV. My daddy says we have every Disney video known to man."

"Good—so does Green. How about we let you pick one out, okay? Hey—don't you have a brother?" I sat up carefully, so I didn't squash the little person or dump it on its ass, and made my way to the video cabinet and the folding wooden panel that hid the 70" plasma television that Green kept in the front room. The sidhe room had no such convenience, but Green, Bracken, Arturo and a few others of the sidhe adored television, movies, and music on compact discs with a passion that few humans I've seen could match.

"My brother's outside with Arturo—Gavin wanted to see the pretty gardens in the moonlight, but I've got a cold and my mama told me to stay in here so I couldn't. Arturo told me to stay in this room and to not be loud and wake you up." He thought for a moment, realized that maybe he hadn't followed *this* order to a T, and finished with, "I wasn't loud, was I?"

I had to laugh. "Nope. Not loud at all. Here—you pick out a DVD, and I'll go get something to eat. You hungry?"

"Do you have pie?"

"Grace always has pie," I reassured, because I could smell caramel apple pie from the counter as I spoke. In a few moments I was sitting on the couch with another plate of dinner, sandwiched between a slowly awakening Bracken and an excited Graeme, watching *The Incredibles*. Bracken hadn't seen the movie yet, and I had to caution Graeme that he wouldn't get another helping of pie if he didn't stop telling Brack what came next, and then Gavin came in and promptly flopped down in front of the television, damp jacket, shoes and all. I got him to take everything off so we could put it in the kitchen by bribing him with apple pie, and we all—Arturo included—settled down for the rest of the movie. It was sort of fun.

Kids laugh at all the good places in a movie, and remind you that you can laugh out loud, and they make oohing and ahing sounds and little bits of commentary when things are exciting, and they know all about the DVD extras, so we got to watch the extra short films that went with it, and listen to the commentary. When everything was done, Gavin turned to me with a face so much like his grandma Grace's it made my heart constrict and said, "So your superpower makes rooms glow, Cory—does it do anything else?" And I had to elbow Bracken as he snickered.

"I bet it's a shield!" Graeme said excitedly. "Like Violet's in the movie—can you turn invisible too?"

"No," Bracken said beside me, "But she can turn it into a weapon, like Gazerbeam could."

"So she could carve things into the bad guys! Do they bleed?" Graeme, the more bloodthirsty of the two, wanted to know.

"Bracken's the one who makes them bleed," I said with a sweet smile at my *due'alle*.

Bracken grinned at me wickedly, and I rolled my eyes. "No," he said, "It's like when Luke Skywalker's hand gets cut off by the light saber...it both cuts and burns."

Both boys made "ooohhhing" sounds, their eyes wide.

"She can also throw fireballs," Arturo added, enjoying the play of truth and story, and the boys looked at me with new respect in their eyes. "She's taken down entire buildings."

"And built them up again!" Brack added enthusiastically. I glared at him then, because the story of how I made that particular building was so *not* suitable for children.

"Do you have a super power, Arturo?" Gavin asked.

"Super strength," I said pertly, and Arturo looked totally surprised. "He could probably lift up this couch, with all of us on it, if he could balance it right. And he has super speed, too."

"I can also turn into a tree, if I want," Arturo said with dignity twinkling from his copper-lightning eyes.

"Wow! Awesome! Can you make people bleed like Bracken?" Gavin liked the tree thing, but blood was always more exciting.

"No—that's Bracken's specialty," Arturo answered back gravely, winking at us over the boy's heads.

"How does Bracken do that?" They both wanted to know.

I smiled ghoulishly. "He can sing to the blood," I whispered. "He can hold

his hand out to the bad guys and call their heart through their bodies until it explodes out their chests and their blood goes everywhere!”

"OOOHHHHH!!!" Two sets of shining eyes turned towards Bracken, and I was surprised to see him flush. "Really—can you really do that Bracken?”

"Sure!" I said blithely. "He did it to a bad guy just today.”

"Did the bad guy die?" This from Gavin, who was looking concerned.

"Unfortunately no." I replied, meaning it sincerely. "But his blood was poisoned—that was pretty exciting.”

"How did you avoid the poisoned blood?" Gavin wanted to know.

"Cory's shield." Bracken laid a hand on the small of my back as he said it, and I could tell he was enjoying himself. I'd wondered if he would like children, but he was a natural. "We worked like a team—like *The Incredibles*. It's more fun that way.”

"Have you ever gotten hurt?" They asked, and suddenly, the game wasn't fun anymore.

"Yes,” I said after a moment when Bracken and I met eyes. "People get hurt when they're defending the people they love. It can be really dangerous.”

"But you're okay?" And their concern was touching.

"Yeah—sure. But that's because Green was here to heal me,” I said.

"Who's Green?" They asked, and a wave of longing swamped over me, and I could feel it emanating from Bracken too, and even from Arturo who was across the room.

"Green's the leader of this hill,” I said simply. *Green's my lover, my beloved, our rock, our root, our sky*, I wanted to say, but I managed to choke all that back. "He can heal people—Bracken here heals most wounds on his own, if they're not too deep, but sometimes his power works on himself, and then he needs Green to stop the bleeding. If I'm hurt, I always need Green's help" I looked at Arturo for approval, and when he nodded, I rolled up my right pant leg. "See here? This burn would have crippled me, if Green hadn't helped." I pulled my shirt down from my shoulder, which looked like a grenade had exploded through it. "This would have killed me. I can only be a superhero if

I've got superheroes with me. You guys—you don't have superheroes with you, so you need to keep yourselves safe, okay?"

Two sober pairs of eyes regarded me brightly, and I mustered up a smile. "Hey—you guys decide—do you want to watch another movie, or do you want to play a game—I'm pretty sure the sprites can pull up Monopoly or something. You hash it out, okay? I'm going to go get my knitting."

I was on my way back from my room, wondering why kids were so much easier to deal with than full-grown humans, when the phone rang. It was Nicky.

"Hey!" I said happily, "How's the trip?"

"Great," he said. "Uhm...really great."

Something in his tone made the back of my neck ripple. "How are you all getting along?"

"Great. Mmm...I mean, *really really* great!"

"Okay, Nicky," I snapped, "Spill it. What's going on? And if you tell me everything's great again, I'll reach through the telephone line and strangle you."

"Uhm...sex," he said at last. "We're having sex. We're having sex in the car when it's stopped. We're having sex in the car when it's going. We stopped here at a hotel to have sex for a few hours before we go again. And I'm not sure if I'm cheating or not, or if this is going to bother you...but I'm really enjoying the whole rest of it."

I was so surprised I dropped my bag of knitting on my foot. "Really?" I asked. "You, Leah, Willow, Ellis...you're all..."

"Having sex," he said happily.

"Uhm. Okay." I thought about it for a minute. A part of me was jealous, but I squashed that part ruthlessly. Nicky deserved to be happy, and free, and if this was making him happy, well that was good. I thought about the times before Bracken, when I'd grabbed Nicky's hand when we were in a crowd, and hadn't worried about what he'd think or about leading him on, or the times I'd hugged him or kissed his cheek. Anything that led us back to that point, I thought wistfully, would have to be a good thing.

"Really?" he asked, and I smiled. It was a little bit watery but it was still a

smile.

"Yeah, really," I said through a rough throat. "Seriously, Nicky—I want you to be happy. If this makes you happy, even if it only makes you happy for now, then you go for it. Have all the sex you want—have more. Bring it to Green, it will make him strong, and you will both be happy and strong when you come back to me, okay?"

"Okay." And his throat sounded rough too.

"But you'll both come back to me, right?" I asked, and hated the plaintive note in my voice. I was glad for him, I reminded myself. With all my heart I was glad.

"You're my north," Nicky said thickly. "You'll always be my north. And you know you don't have to worry about Green. He'll always come back to you, Cory. I don't think he wants to live another two thousand years if you're not with him for your lifetime."

I nodded. I knew that. "I love you Nicky," I said without qualification. "Go get laid."

He laughed a little and rung off, and I was left, feeling lost until I sat next to Bracken and joined Arturo and the kids in watching *Shrek II* Bracken had seen this one before, and it delighted me to hear him laugh at his favorite parts—for some reason he really likes that damn cat with Antonio Banderas' voice. But as I sat down, he felt a stiffness in my shoulders and leaned over to ask "What's wrong?" in my ear.

I almost said "Nothing", but I was still feeling bad about this afternoon, so I shrugged. "I'll tell you later—it's not big." But then the phone rang again, and it was Green, and I forgot to tell Bracken after all, which was unfortunate because it might have warned him at least about what was to come later.

Green sounded alone and sad, and it hurt me to talk to him, but I sat in the kitchen and talked quietly and knit, rehashing the day's events. He was exhausted from the usual round of meetings, and from caring for Funky Man, and there was a silence on the phone as he recalled the terrified trust the shattered sidhe had placed in him.

"But I did meet an old friend," he said after a moment, and his voice brightened, and so did I.

"A good one?" I asked hopefully.

"About to be even better, I think." And the suggestion in his voice was unmistakable and I was so happy he wouldn't be alone for the night that I laughed with a full heart for the first time since he rang. "So tell me, how was your day?" he asked, and it was easier to speak.

I told him almost everything—from the attack by Hollow Man to the fight with Bracken to Nicky's sudden new life. I glossed over the meeting with Hallow and gave him the barest details about the meeting with Chuck Granger, but that was more because they seemed unimportant next to the other stuff. He wanted to know why I hadn't called on him for power with Hollow Man, and I said kindly, "You're busy healing, beloved. Bracken and I dealt. We're exhausted, but we dealt. You need to be strong so you can come home to us."

"I hate this," he said darkly, and although I said a private amen, for his ears I replied, "We need you to be strong when you get here, because we're going to be falling apart...don't worry, Green—we haven't stopped needing you. /haven't stopped needing you."

The fight with Bracken amused him—more than I think he let on, and when I asked him why he thought it was so funny he replied, "Because I expected you two to dance the moment you got together. I'm just enjoying the show, that's all."

I snorted. "Well then you're going to love this." And I told him about Nicky. Green was delighted.

"Really? The whole Cadillac is a traveling orgy? Next to meeting Eric, that's probably the best news I've heard all day."

I blinked. I guess between the hurricanes and the oil industry and caring for Funky Man, on Green's end at least, it really was. "Since it's traveling your way, I'm glad you think so," I said warmly, but my beloved knew me too well to let it go.

"You're hurt," he said gently.

"I'm a stupid human," I said with a sniff. "It's good. I mean, most of me knows that it's a good thing...but..."

"But he was ours and now we have to share him with the world?" Green

was always wise.

"I'll get over it," I said with dignity. "I'm not dumb—what we were doing, date night with me, whenever you were free and *not* with me with you—Nicky deserves more. You can't just dole out love like cookies...it's sort of the opposite of cookies. Too many cookies make you sick. Not enough love does the same thing...if we'd have kept on, Nicky's heart would have gotten sick. Maybe this way we can have each other, and Nicky can stay well."

"But he was yours, and now you have to share him with the world," Green finished.

"Yeah," I sighed, honesty forced on me at last. "He was ours, and now we have to share him with the world."

"Goddess, I love you," he said, so fervently that the tears I'd held at bay actually flooded over.

"I love you too," I choked. "When Nicky gets there, you'd better play and play and play, do you hear me?"

"I'm way ahead of you, beloved," he said with some heat. "And then I'll come home to you."

We rung off shortly after that, and when I cradled the phone, I looked up and saw that Grace and Chloe had come quietly in through the front door and were finishing the movie with the boys. The credits rolled, the last little mutant donkey flew off into the sunset, and Chloe called briskly to the boys to get their things, it was time to go.

"Can we stay here, mama?" Graeme wanted to know. "Cory and Bracken have superpowers—maybe if we stay we can see them use them!"

I flushed brightly, not having realized that even the best kid is a complete rat-fink when he's told a good story.

"They do not have superpowers," Chloe snapped impatiently. "Superpowers are for television and not real life, now let's go."

"But mama..." Gavin protested, "Cory made the store glow that one night. And Bracken can make a bad guy's heart jump out of his chest! And Arturo has super strength."

"And Grace can fly," Chloe said dryly, "Gavin, where's your coat?"

"It's right here," I said from the darkened kitchen. "And Grace really can fly." I don't know what made me add it. Honestly, I don't, but it irritated me that a woman who had just discovered her dead mother, looking no older than herself, showing her fangs and everything, should completely dismiss the whole 'superpowers' idea.

"I don't want to hear it from you," Chloe snapped, and her face flushed with real anger. "You're the one who filled their head with this crap—I should have known better than to leave my kids with a foul-mouthed teenybopper and her hunk of the month."

"It's not crap," Grace said evenly from behind her daughter. Her expression was a terrible mixture of hurt, dismay, and gentleness. "It's the truth. All of it—although I have the feeling they were telling the boys just to make them laugh. And Cory has been responsible for every creature under this hill since she came back from the city in December, and Bracken has been killing himself to help her. They deserve your respect, Chloe."

"Right mom—you keep lecturing me about respect when you're the one who left your family to have a party with a bunch of pretty young men," Chloe snapped nastily, and now *my* temper flashed.

"You have no idea what your mother gave up for you," I hissed, taking a step forward and letting my anger blaze out of my eyes. "She hurt every day, knowing that you and your sister would never know that she'd been with you your entire lives. When you walked into the store last week, her heart broke, because she was thrilled to see you and at the same time terrified that you'd be exactly the same judgmental bitch you're acting like right now."

"My mother *died* when I was a little kid!" Chloe raged. "And I learned to live with that—do you have any idea what kind of grief that is?"

"You're goddamned right I do!" I raged back. "The difference is that you act like grief gives you some special pass here in your mother's home, with her people. You don't seem to realize that to be at this hill that kind of grief is practically a membership requirement, and your mom's one of the charter members."

"Yeah—who'd you lose that makes you such an expert?" Chloe asked

nastily, and I saw the anguish on Grace's face and couldn't go on.

"None of your freaking business," I said quietly, subsiding and taking a step backwards. "Graeme, Gavin—it was nice to see you, I really enjoyed our night together. Bracken—I'm going down to share blood with the vampires. Do you want to come?" He'd stood up when the argument had started, as surprised and as helpless as Arturo, I think, and unable to put himself between the three of us for fear of hurting the wrong woman. Now he blurred—just to spite Chloe—and scooped me and my knitting bag up in hyperspeed, blurring us across the hall and down the stairs to the darkling common room before I could even register Chloe's expression.

When we got to the foot of the stairs, before turning right into the darkling hall, he slowed to normal speed and chuckled quietly. When I asked him why he replied, "The last thing I heard was Graeme saying 'Wow—he has super speed too!'" I laughed a little and leaned my head on his arm.

"Green said hi," I said quietly.

"Did you tell him hi for me?" he asked, but we both knew he didn't need to.

"Of course."

"You talked for a long time."

"I was complaining about you," I kidded and he leaned over and kissed the top of my head.

"Yeah, I'm an asshole, I know."

I turned towards him, and suddenly the whole afternoon, the argument, the prevarication, his smoldering anger and my defensiveness, it all melted away. "You're perfect," I said, and pulled him down for a fervent kiss. "You're everything I needed and didn't know I needed. You're everything I couldn't survive without, and I never knew, even when I was dying without you. You, me, Adrian, Green—we would have found a way. You said you would have died rather than compete with Adrian when he was still here, but it wouldn't have happened like that. We would have found a way, the four of us, because there can't be a me without a Green, and there can't be a me without a you."

Bracken's eyes, always the color of a still pond in shadow, glimmered

brightly. "Dammit, Cory..." he said thickly, "You can't just hit me with something like that...you have to give me a card or something or we have to be in bed. I don't know what to do with romance when we're standing in a hallway about to go work."

I smiled, and knew my own eyes were bright too. "Just tell me you love me, asshole, and we can get a move on."

"I love you, asshole," he said smartly, and I laughed as he lifted me up and kissed me, and then we just held and held and held. We were interrupted by Phillip, clearing his throat down the hall in front of the common room.

"You know, we all fall asleep around dawn," he said dryly, and Bracken reluctantly set me down.

"Yeah, yeah," I grumbled, "Work work work."

But the truth was, I enjoyed blooding the vampires. I hadn't, at first—at first I'd been totally icked out by the idea of tasting a stranger's blood, and vice versa, but then it turned out that I had an interesting ability. We weren't sure if it was because I was a human marked by a vampire or because I was a sorceress marked by a vampire, but either way, I could *taste* the thing that most dominated the daylight life of the vampire whose blood I was sharing.

And they could taste me.

I had tasted Adrian's blood one night, one unforgettable night when we were making furious, healing love in Green's gardens by moonlight, but I hadn't known about the ability then. I had been covered in Adrian's blood tears, as he relived the most awful, scarring moment of a short life, and when I tasted them, all I could taste was salt water.

It wasn't until I started blooding the other vampires that I realized this meant that Adrian's daylight life had been totally marked by tears.

But Marcus had tasted like dry-erase marker and coffee, and I had looked at him and said, "You loved being a teacher, didn't you?" And he had wept at my feet, a joyous, cathartic weeping that validated everything Marcus had loved about his life. Phillip had tasted like snow and hot chocolate, and that made me happy, because he still loved snow skiing, although the hot chocolate was a thing of the past. Bryn had tasted like wildflowers in the spring, Chester had tasted like a teriyaki burger smothered in mushrooms and wet dog at the lake, and Ellis

had tasted like pizza, milkshakes, and the fuzzy sweater of the first girl he'd ever felt up. It was a lovely moment, for all of us, to know and be known for the thing that made you the most you. Dying, resurrecting, feeding on blood and sex and passion—these were frightening things, identity defying, terrifying changes. It was a joy greater than words could say for the vampires to know that the thing, the taste, of what had made them the person they were still coursed through their veins.

And then, they tasted me, and as our ritual, something special to their being the only known vampires with a human queen, I guess, they told me what I tasted like.

The answer always made them weep blood, and it was always the same.

Unless they visited me in my room, as Ellis did the week before, blooding the vampires was an informal affair. I sat, sometimes with Green, sometimes with Bracken, on their common room couch—the vampires favored black leather, which kind of icked out the elves, but they dealt—and knit and visited, until one of the vampires approached me. The ones I knew best simply sat next to me and waited for a pause in the conversation, but the other, shyer or more reluctant vampires, knelt before me on one knee, and formally requested a sharing of blood.

Today, the first one to approach was a tiny, wraithlike girl with flyaway blond hair who had been about sixteen when she'd died. She was one of Adrian's first saved, except he had saved her from a life of forced prostitution in mining camps. She'd been dying of tuberculosis at the time, and he had 'saved' her from that, as well. Her name was Lila, and although she'd been dead for nearly one hundred and ten years, she had never quite lost her fear of humans. She approached me formally, dressed in a loose white dress with a hand-knit shrug over the sleeves, and bent to one knee.

I put my knitting down, and smiled at her—it was hard to remember that she'd been born before the beginning of the Civil War.

"I'd like to request a blooding, Queen of Night," she said softly, and I nodded.

"Of course, Lila—it would be an honor." Because it would be. It was not lost on me that she had waited so long; after so many years with Adrian as a leader, acknowledging me must have been like changing from breathing air to

breathing water. Or not breathing at all.

She took my hand in her own tiny, dry, one and it was like being touched by an empty vinyl glove, and then, because I had no fangs, she punctured her own wrist as she held my hand, and I drew it to my mouth to taste the slow blood welling from her cool skin.

I blinked. "Rabbit stew and applesauce," I said after a moment, then, more thoughtfully, "Poppies...thousands of them...the smell of..." Not a lover, but a girl she'd loved..."The smell of your little sister's hair," I finished quietly.

Lila's face was small and pointed like a diamond, and the skin stretched even tighter over it, stark white with black eyes in frightening contrast, and a single splash of scarlet slid down the side of her nose. She nodded, somberly. "Heather died the year before I did," she said simply. She didn't explain how she knew the taste of rabbit stew.

Instead, she drew my wrist to her mouth, and with a tiny, rabbit sort of nip of her own she punctured my wrist with one fang and sipped, and her eyes closed on their own and her whole body shuddered convulsively and her throat made a sound like a toddler singing to himself, and suddenly she wrapped both arms around her knees, making that low, sad, cry-singing sound into the cradle of her body. "Oh Goddess...Goddess...they all said it but I didn't believe..." she keened, and I stroked her hair awkwardly and looked around the room. Marcus and Phillip were there in a flash, arms wrapped protectively around the tiny, eternally old child, and together they pulled her out the door that went from the darkling common to their shared rooms.

There was a respectful quiet then, that was interrupted by an irreverent voice saying, "What did she do to that kid, Mom?"

I looked up from where Lila and the boys had disappeared and saw Grace at the hallway entrance, Chloe in tow. Arturo stood behind them, one hand on Grace's waist, and she had covered that hand with her own. At Chloe's interruption of the sad, terrible tableau, Grace looked sharply at her daughter and hissed, "You stay there and shut up, Chloe. There's something I think you need to see."

And then to my complete surprise and total mortification, Grace flashed across the room and sank to one knee in front of me.

"No..." I said, feeling helpless, but Grace overrode me, speaking loudly and formally into the now silent room.

"I ask to share blood with you, Lady Cory, beloved of Adrian the Lord of Night, beloved of Green, Lord of the Day."

"You don't have to do this..." I murmured. Grace and I had never blooded. My respect for her—my love for her as my surrogate mom—had never questioned her loyalty, had never worried about weakness. It would be like wondering if the sun would rise the next day. Grace would be there for me, for Green, for the hill, because she loved us and would not think to do otherwise.

"I really do, my Queen," she said gently, and took my unblooded hand in hers, then pulled her own wrist to her mouth and bit.

She held out the slow-bleeding skin and I took it towards my lips, feeling like a little kid who's been given her first beer. This was Grace...I couldn't subjugate Grace...but I was her leader, and she was offering me fealty, and I guess I had to. Trying not to let my hands shake, I touched her wrist with my mouth and pulled, then closed my eyes to get the flavors just right.

"Cinnamon sugar cookies..." I said on a choked breath, "Sipping diet coke while knitting in a room with a big window...lake water in your mouth, while watching your children play...the smell of your babies' skin...the taste of little girl's perfume...the sound of their laughter...the mints your husband used after he'd had a beer and still wanted to kiss you...sharing the first chocolate chip cookie out of the oven with your daughters..." There was more, but I couldn't go on. Goddess, God, child of love, how could she have lived missing them all so much.

Grace looked up at me from eyes washed with crimson, so much blood running down her face from tears that it puddled on her jeans, leaving big splotchy stains where it fell. With hands that shook even worse than mine she took my wrist to her mouth and took a solid, clean bite, then sucked once, twice, hard and purposefully. Then she tilted her head back and let out a cry of anguish, and I knew the sound; it was a louder version of Lila's keening, a softer version of the scream that Marcus had given, it was the sound made by every vampire I'd blooded except Adrian and Andres. It was the sound of someone who had wanted to live, and who had died because living had not been an option.

"Sunshine," she cried. "Glory Goddess and hallelujah, my Queen, you taste

like sunshine." And sobbing, she leaned her head against me and I wrapped my arms around her and let her weep longing into my lap. Eventually the sobbing stilled, and another vampire—a young man, who had been found dying from a car crash next to his dead beloved—stepped hesitantly forward to take her place. Arturo waited at Grace's elbow, to help her up, and she went easily into his arms, bonelessly, as trusting as a sleepy kitten, and I met his eyes miserably. A week ago I had called the entire kiss because I had seen Grace cry, and now I was the one who made her cry.

But Arturo's look was kind. "This was good," he said quietly. "Chloe needed to see it, to see you be...you. To see her mother's world. Don't ever apologize for being the leader your people need, Corinne Carol-Anne."

I almost lost it then, broke down completely, because for once I was so glad to hear my entire first name. "Promise me something, Arturo?" I asked plaintively, as he half carried/half walked Grace towards the doorway where a frightened, wretched Chloe was waiting for her. He turned. "Promise me you'll never call me Lady Cory?"

He smiled, flashing silver capped teeth. "You of all people should know that I can't make promises I don't intend to keep," he said over his shoulder, and then they were gone, and I was left, face to face with the burden of being Lady Cory, Queen of the Vampires, until I'd blooded a few more of my people. Being royalty sucked large.

Glen stepped forward, hesitantly, and knelt at my feet. He'd been a sharply handsome young man with dark blonde hair, and all that he had lost from his actual life was gazing at me from burning eyes. "Will I really taste sunshine?" he asked. They all wondered if it was real until it happened to them—which is pretty much how us mortals looked at death, I thought wryly.

"That's what I'm told," I said back, and accepted his offered wrist. But when I tasted his blood, I blushed. It tasted like me. Well, it tasted like me when...when Bracken or Green had been buried between my thighs, and then came up to kiss me, and I was a glaze on their faces and a tang on their tongues...I was silent for a moment, mortified that I would have to explain what it was he missed, when I actually thought about it. Glen would get to taste *that* as often as he wanted, here at Green's hill. Shape changers, other vampires, even elves, would give him any taste he wanted for free—he would have no cause to miss the taste of a woman. I swallowed, then, and took another taste, and

realized...

That taste of me on my lovers' lips was really just *me*...and because it was from an intense place, it was me squared. What he missed wasn't the taste of a woman during love making...it was the taste of a particular woman. He missed this woman with the same intensity that I missed the taste of Adrian.

My eyes misted then. I'd held it together through Grace, but this moment, on top of that one, undid me. I spoke into a breathless silence, because usually I would announce the taste of the vampire almost immediately, and I had been silent for some time. "What was her name?" I asked quietly, and he bowed his head over my proffered hand.

"Amber," he murmured. "Her name was Amber."

"She's still in your blood," I told him, and hoped it would help. I didn't even wince as he re-opened the wound at my wrist.

He breathed deeply, a reflexive movement only since vampires didn't breathe, and sighed. "You really do," he said, and he looked at me with happy tears in his eyes this time. "You taste like sunshine. And Amber." Then he stood and kissed my cheek and faded into the crowd of vampires like paper into a stack, and I sagged against Bracken, feeling wrung out and limp already. Suddenly Phillip and Marcus stepped forward from the crowd.

"That's enough," Phillip said roughly, meeting Bracken's eyes. "That's enough. Our Queen serves us well, and she can blood more of us on another day."

I half expected protest, but Bracken had swung me up into his arms already, and Marcus had parted the crowd, and what greeted me instead was a respectful silence, a quiet bowing, the parting in a small sea of people as my beloved bore me away.

"Whereto, my lady?" he asked, his voice teasing as we cleared the doorway, but I wasn't in the mood.

"Don't." I used to go for months at a time without tears, really I did. But the day had been emotion fraught and I was exhausted, and it felt like I'd been fighting them all day and I was more weary of the fight than I would have been of the actual tears. "Don't. Not you. Never you, Bracken. Please? You have to promise me..."

"Wait...sh...sh...sh..." He cradled me against him now, stopping at the end of the hallway where hopefully no one could hear us. "What am I promising?"

"I'll never be 'Lady Cory' to you..." I wailed, and the look in his eyes only confirmed my worst pain.

"Corinne Carol-Anne Kirkpatrick op Crocken Green," he said, and my full name falling from his lips like heavy gold garnered my complete attention, "You know very well that the only person at the hill who will never be obliged to bow to you is Green."

Damn Bracken. Damn all elves. Damn the powerful sidhe and their compulsion for the truth. Damn it all.

But, as though sensing I wouldn't make it without some sort of reassurance that I would never have to command him, he smiled, a rarity enough for Bracken who wore his grimness like most people wore shoes. "But that doesn't mean you don't get to bow to me in bed, right?"

Okay. Damn everything else, but bless my beloved after all.

"Right," I sniffled. "But first I'm going to finish your damn sweater, okay?" I'd stitched most of it together during the movie, and had been working the neck on circular needles as I'd sat with the vampires. Just two more inches and a few woven ends, and I'd be good to go.

And finish it I did, in the quiet of our bedroom, sitting in one of the two overstuffed chairs Green had furnished it with when I hadn't been looking. Bracken sat next to me, working on homework.

"Whatcha doing?" I asked, after thirty minutes of blessed silence when my nerves magically realigned like little loops of yarn into a peaceful fabric. I was in the process of binding off, and pleased that I could talk and finish at the same time.

"Physics," he said shortly.

I groaned. "Goddess. I'm going to have to do mine in a minute."

"Whose work do you think I'm doing?" He looked at me as though I were stupid, and I almost dropped one of my last stitches.

"You can't do that—he'll know my handwriting!" There were actually many more reasons why he couldn't do my homework for me, but I was still young enough for the first thing out of my mouth to be "we'll get caught."

Bracken grunted. "Hardly." And tilted the paper so that I could see. Instead of Bracken's flowing old-school numbers and cursive letters I could see a compressed diagram filled with my small, neat figures.

I was too impressed with his forgery to come up with a good reply for that, so I swore for a couple of minutes, finished the neck and wove in the yarn, complaining the whole time. "Dammit, Brack—how am I supposed to learn the damn subject if you do it for me?" I asked finally, standing up with the sweater in front of me. It's a good thing I'd used chunky yarn, I thought irritably, because it was huge—on me it went past my knees. If I'd used sport-weight yarn, it would have taken me a year.

"How are you supposed to learn the subject if the professor is a stupid asshole who can't explain things worth shit," he retorted, his eyes narrowed in mutiny. "You don't need to know physics to learn business or politics or law or psychology. *Those* are the things you *need* to study, and you don't need to stay up until two in the morning when you're already exhausted from fighting off bad guys and leading your people. Whether you like it or not, you *are* our Lady Cory, and you need to learn to do what other leaders do and delegate! Hey—is it finished?"

The question, asked with a tone of wonder and delight, completely threw me off track. "Yeah..." I said diffidently. "Do you like it?"

His eyes widened, and a shy smile quirked at the corners of his mouth. The argument, I guessed, was over. I think he had won—at least for the moment—but we were both gazing at the sweater in appreciation, and I don't think he really noticed. I smoothed the fabric under my hands, and glanced up at him to see if he really did like it.

"It's great," he said simply. "Let me try it on."

The yarn was an acrylic/wool blend, so I didn't have to worry about blocking, and I practically danced as Bracken shucked his shirt to his pale, sculpted torso, and then slid my sweater over his broad shoulders and tightened, elongated abdomen. It was a little snug in the chest, so it stretched with him, and fell down past his belt line, his narrow waist and hips lost a little in the swing.

There aren't patterns out there for a sidhe physique, I thought fretfully, and some of the stitches were irregular, even under the bumpy yarn.

"It looks homemade," I said, trying not to be depressed. Bracken didn't notice.

"It's good. It's very good," he said sincerely, moving to the bathroom to look at it in front of the mirror. He ran his hands down the textured fabric and his smooth forehead wrinkled. "I can...I can feel you...in the strands. The wool...it carries you with it...sweat and oils and...and thoughts almost." He turned. "What a magical thing humans do. I never would have guessed something so simple had magic in it."

I smiled at him, a smile so wide it stretched my cheek and made my eyes squint, and so heartfelt, I could barely hold his gaze. "You like it," I said, really knowing the meaning of the word 'delight'. I'd felt this way when I'd given Green his scarf, but then, Green was Green—anything I did for him filled him with joy and wonder. Bracken was different—much more difficult to please, much less inclined to accept and enjoy. And my smile seemed to move something in him. He looked away, again, almost bashful, like a school kid getting a cookie from a sweetheart, then held out his arms for me. I burrowed in, loving him so much my heart hammered against my ribs and my lungs couldn't fill.

"You will knit one for Green?" he asked hopefully, his voice rumbling against my ear.

"Oh yes," I said, my face mushed pleasantly between that spot where nipples and sternum meet. The yarn sat patiently in a huge Ziploc bag under the bed, and I had already picked out the pattern.

"Good," he said happily, his skin moving restively under the sweater. "That's good," he repeated, and, physics forgotten, we had another of those long, quiet hugs that I had enjoyed when Adrian had been alive and we'd just been friends, but that I cherished now.

Eventually we got ready for bed, and I was just dropping off to sleep when his chest rumbled sleepily next to my ear. "So..."

"Uhm?"

"When you blooded that one vampire...Glen?"

"Uhm hm?"

"What exactly did you think you tasted, when you first had his blood?"

I laughed sleepily. Trust Bracken to notice the complete mortification and the terrible blush. "Tell you what, beloved. If we don't get into a snit and no bad guys show up tomorrow, I'll give you a demonstration tomorrow night, okay?"

He chuckled, also sleepily. "That's a deal."

And that's all it took. The phone call from Nicky, topped with one thought of arousal—just enough to set a tired tingle through our bodies—and the gateway was opened.

GREEN

Sex Cubed and Healed Twilight

The franchise meeting broke up and Green suppressed a yawn. He'd started acquiring gas stations about twenty years before, when the mini-mart began to spawn on every corner and Adrian had noted that many of the were & vampire recruits seemed to live at such places. The business aspect of running something so very utilitarian and so very profit based had always been the most onerous part of his job as leader of his hill. He looked forward to his bi-yearly trips to Texas like a hyperactive nine year old looked forward to a three hour car trip to visit a dying aunt.

"Green—so good to see you!" Green looked up from the papers he was shoving into his canvass briefcase, and the first genuine smile of the day crossed his features. Eric Reynolds had been a sixteen year old runaway when Green had first met him, panhandling in the streets of Huston. Reynolds' was actually one of the wealthier names in the area, but Eric's personality and sexual proclivities had been an uncomfortable fit with the excessive conventionality that came with wealth, privilege, and a father convinced that real men killed animals for sport and by no means ever felt up other men for pleasure. Eric had been dying then, of starvation and disease, but Green had cleaned him up and healed him—much the same way he had cleaned Funky Man and healed Adrian—and then, because he could only heal symptoms, but never the root of a terminal disease, Green had given him Adrian's choice. Vampire or were-creature—which would he choose to be? Eric had chosen were-coyote but after a couple of years and some serious

growing up, he had not, in the end, chosen Green's hill.

Instead, he had taken the education Green had offered and the stake money as well, (long since paid back) and had established himself in the oil business, working long and hard until his father had been in the uncomfortable position of being bought out by his estranged son. Eric had offered to relent on one condition—he wanted back at the family table for holidays, companions included. Eric's father may have been a son-of-a-bitch, but his mother was a gentle woman, devoted to her children, and devastated by her son's exile. Eric also had two younger sisters whom he missed dearly. Father Reynolds had no choice, and the last time Green had spoken to his young protégé, (now in his mid-thirties but looking much younger thanks to his were-creature status) he had just walked his youngest sister down the aisle, by her request. Eric was a living reminder that sometimes the human world did have its vital attractions.

"Eric—goddess, it's good to see you. I'd almost forgotten there was a reason I didn't hate this town."

Eric grinned, the expression suiting his fine-boned, little boy face, and ran a hand through expensively cut sandy-blond hair before he sobered. "I was so sorry to hear about Adrian," he said after a moment. "How's Bracken taking it?"

Green grimaced. Eric had played with both of them, when he'd lived with Green—of course he'd know how truly devastated Brack would be.

"He still hasn't forgiven our love for up and dying on us. And to be truthful, it took a hell of a lot for me to forgive him too, the stupid bugger. If it hadn't been for Cory, I don't know if either one of us would have made it through this year."

"Cory? Have I met him?"

Green laughed the kind of bitter-sweet laugh that made his eyes close tightly before he could take a breath and answer. "That, my friend, is a very, very long story."

Eric smiled unabashedly, the grin carving great, charming dimples in his cheeks. "Great—as it happens, I'm done for the day."

"Dinner then?" Green asked, cheered at the thought of not having to go back to his hotel room with only Funky Man for company. He'd set the two of them up in a suite in anticipation of Nicky's arrival, and had left the meetings

twice to check on his lost brother. Both times had found Funky Man sleeping in front of the television, and both times he'd been so happy to see Green that he'd alternatively hugged him, like an overgrown child, or pet his hair in awe and woe for his own lost beauty. Green was sure his brother would improve with time and care, but for the moment a little sane company was a welcome relief.

"Absolutely—my treat," Eric agreed, and Green stood as they readied to leave the posh and grim office building.

"My thanks. I do have to return to the suite by eight to make a phone call, though," Green warned, "And to check on somebody."

Eric looked sideways at his old leader from speculative eyes. "Does this means my plans to stay in your room are premature? Because right now, I'm so single it hurts."

Green laughed then, a great, booming, relieving laugh. "No, my friend, I'd say your plans to stay in my room are exactly what I needed. And believe me, I'm the last thing from single anyone could claim."

Again, Eric nodded, and clapped a hand on Green's shoulder, which was about even with his own head. "Good, my brother, because I would have been terribly disappointed."

Dinner was at a small Italian place with good wine and better pasta, and Green had to admit, fabulous company. Eric was completely enthralled by Green's description of Cory, her long, uncertain courtship with Adrian, her brief, brutal courtship with Bracken, and Green's own guileless assumption from the moment he saw her, that she would someday be his as well.

"It figures," Eric said good-naturedly, as they polished off a bottle of wine and moved on to a sweet, deep-fried/ice-cream confection, "In fact, I should have known."

Green raised his eyebrows. "What an odd thing to say...I must tell you, the whole situation surprised the hell out of me."

Eric narrowly missed snorting wine out his nose. "I don't see how. The three of you...I mean, I know you and Bracken were never a thing, but...but you and Bracken were both so bound up in Adrian, that whomever he brought home to love, well, you'd be bound up with him or her too."

Green blinked thoughtfully. "I never thought of it like that. And Cory—well, you can be certain that when Adrian brought her home she was prepared for him to be her one and only forever and ever."

Eric sighed then. "Poor baby—how is she adjusting to life on the hill?"

Green thought very carefully then, before a smile bloomed at the corners of his finely sculpted mouth. "She's...adjusting," he said sincerely. She and Bracken would learn to mesh. She and Nicky would find balance. She would learn to stand without him and take strength from him when he was there. "I have a special faith in my beloved."

"You have faith in us all, leader," Eric said softly. "That's why we try not to let you down. You 'bout done?" And with that he covered Green's hand, as it replaced the check with his card, and Green looked up and met his little-boy blue eyes with a burning emerald of his own.

"Not even close, you?"

Eric swallowed, as though his throat had gone dry suddenly. "I've got all night."

Funky Man was delighted to meet Eric, a new person who knew Green, and, as he said frequently, "a pretty human boy." Eric, true to all of Green's children, was both kind and gracious to a person so damaged that even his name was in ruins.

"What are you watching?" Eric asked, eyeing the Disney cartoon with amusement.

"Kim Possible," Funky replied with a full mouth. Green had brought him take-out lasagna from the restaurant. "She's a pretty human girl, like sidhe, but not real."

Green raised his eyes, and took a better look at the cartoon. He and Eric flanked his guest, slouching on the generously sized couch, and although not a look was exchanged and no skin touched, there was a growing, palpable, delicious tension between the two men that Green enjoyed savoring enough to stretch out the length of an easy, excruciating half hour. "Not bad, Funky Man," he said after the episode was over. "You about have her pegged. We're going to retire then—all good with you?"

Funky Man looked at Green slyly from faded gold/violet spangled eyes. "Retire, Green Man? Is that what we call it these days?"

Green laughed, clasped his brother's hand in his own. "You may call it whatever you like, Funky Man, and you may have it if you wish."

Funky shook his head. "Not yet, Green Man. Still too broken inside."

Green kissed the dusky violet skin, released the thin, long-fingered hand, and ran a caress down the shorn scalp. "You'll heal, my brother. You'll heal."

Eric's expression as he pulled Green into the bedroom was somber and kind. "If he heals, it's because he had the luck to find you."

"More like the Goddess' will," Green said thoughtfully, and then the door shut behind him, and he turned, grasped Eric by the shoulders and threw him back against the wall, mating his mouth with Eric's into a hard, hungry kiss, and the subject was tabled for the moment.

Eric didn't need healing, like so many of Green's lovers. He didn't need mating and tenderness like the sylphs. Unlike Cory, he wasn't human, and would heal any bruises almost instantly. Eric was hard bodied and starving for flesh, and he gave as good as he got. Sex was sweaty, pounding, and muscular, exulting in the physical, in the joy of fucking, and after Eric had thrust again and again and finally shuddered and spent himself into Green's moist flesh, the two of them collapsed, laughing, face down against the creaky, inadequate hotel bed.

"Oh, Goddess," Green groaned good naturedly. "I miss my bed back at home."

"I'd bet that's not all you miss," Eric replied, playfully biting at a flawless, pale, green-tinted shoulder.

Green looked peacefully at his friend from sated, sideways eyes. "You'd be right. You're fascinated by her, aren't you? You haven't even met her."

Eric's head was pillowed on his arms, and it made the act of looking away awkward. Green, recognizing discomfort in a human lover, moved his body, covering Eric's side, keeping his sweated skin from cooling in the aftermath.

"Eric?"

"I had to leave, you know," Eric said, his voice muffled by his arms. "I had

to leave. I would have fallen in love with one of you—Adrian, Bracken, you...it was coming, like a glacier, or an earthquake or a tidal wave, and I had to leave because I knew...somehow, I knew that the person one of you chose to love would be the focus...the lens through which all of your loves would pass through, and that she'd have the strength to take that love and reshape the world. And I knew it wasn't going to be me."

Green knew, without a doubt, that there would be tears stinging the skin of Eric's arms. He answered the revelation, which was not the surprise he might have once thought it to be, in the only way he knew how.

He kissed the sweat from a tanned shoulder, from his spine, down towards a pale buttock, which he bit, just hard enough to gain a startled, surprised yelp. Then back down to a thigh—humanly furred—then to the back of a knee, a tender Achilles tendon, and back up, making tender, needy love to his old protégé, to his friend.

When the time at last came to thrust his own body into Eric's, his lover was sobbing for him, pleading and begging for possession, and Green was aching, bursting with the need to possess, with the need to come.

And with the first shock and slide of one flesh into another, from nearly two thousand miles away, he felt Cory awaken.

And with her awakening he was plunged into a sexual kaleidoscope, down his connection through his binding to Nicky who was penetrating, being penetrated, tasting, being tasted, all at a moment in a tangle of limbs and nerve endings and orifices that even Green would have had trouble sorting out, and then, he was inside Nicky, feeling all that Nicky felt, giving Nicky his own experiences, and in a frantic burst to be himself, he instead followed Nicky's connection to Cory.

Cory had been shouting in her sleep, and her throat was raw, the demands issuing from it now surprising Green, because she so rarely demanded anything in bed, content to match with passion and be led in experience. But now she was shouting, and a puzzled, frantic Bracken was pounding into her, suckling on her (no mean feat for a body so much larger than Cory's) and his clever, long-fingered hands were exploring, invading along the sweat slickened, come-wetted cleft of her bottom, and then, as even as her shouting stopped, he was inside, and she was exploding, hurtling through space with the force of a supernova, her power unleashed, out of control, following Green back through

Nicky, who shouted and spilled white light and seed onto all those with him, and then back to Green, who spent himself in release and then held his breath, feeling her titanic surge of power fill him, push at his skin, threaten to explode out his eyeballs and through his very pores.

He exhaled, seeing wisps of light escape his lips to tangle through the darkened room, settling on the bed which to his surprise shifted almost immediately to a solid, darkened oak version of the one he had at home, and pulled away almost frantically from Eric who had climaxed so hard in the blaze of magic that he had collapsed on the bed and was now barely inching his way towards consciousness.

As Green sat back on his heels, there was a timid knock on the door, and then it opened, and Funky Man was in the doorway, sounding lost and frightened in the complete dark.

"Green Man, all the light's went out...is it all good, Green Man?"

And still, the power buzzed along his skin, like electric millipedes, walking, scurrying, crawling and raising gooseflesh at every step.

"Come here, brother," he said hoarsely, and Funky moved obediently forward; his eyes in the dark were limpid dark purple pools of heart-breaking trust.

Green fumbled for Funky Man's hands in the dark, felt Eric shift and moan in repletion beside him, and all this, even the touch of the dry, shriveled skin in his own was secondary to the power spilling along through his veins, along his capillaries, thundering in his chest. *Goddess*, he groaned inside his head, *how does she stand it all?*

"You're glowing like the moon, Green Man," Funky whispered, and Green summoned a light-lit smile.

"And you'll glow too, brother," he replied, and covered Funky Man's mouth in a gentle, sex-less kiss.

Magic made a tremendous booming whoosh in his ears as it flooded out of his body and into his brother's, churning like a waterfall, spinning like light in a dark-matter blender; furiously, the magic poured from Green to Funky Man, filling his lungs with clean, disease free air, cleansing his skin of pain, of scars, of the memory of scars, filling his muscles with blood and fat and tissue, shoring

up his bones to the sturdiness of trees. His hair, which had been a gentle violet stubble, sprouted, grew, cascaded to his shoulders, to his waist, past his hips, spangled with gold and silver and gleaming like the night. Funky Man made a groan, a scream of surprise and ecstasy and the pain of healing, the sound itself swallowed by Green's mouth as he continued to spill healing born of the thunder of sex and the tenderness of love and friendship and of all the things that bound Cory to Green through the grace of their other lovers.

Finally the flood diminished to a river, and the river to a stream and the stream to a trickle of power that drifted from Green's mouth into the room in general, circling the lights and giving a soft ambient glow to the three surprised men, sitting, kneeling, lying, stunned about the bed.

"Funky Man?" Green asked hesitantly, looking at his brother's profoundly beautiful healed body in the soft light. "Are you all right?"

"Green?" And the voice was no longer quavering, or wandering or lost. "Your name is Green." Wonder. Stark wonder. "And my name..." he said, and he looked up at Green with a beautiful, whole, healthy face lit with pleasure and amazement. "My name is Twilight."

"Goddess," breathed Eric stilly from his side. "Goddess...Green—what did you do?"

"Not me—it was my beloved. Look at you, Twilight," he whispered, as Eric fell back asleep. "You're whole."

They sat, frozen in aftermath, so fixed on the loveliness of a once ruined brother that when the phone by the newly made bed rang shrilly, they all jumped.

"That," said Green practically, "Would be Bracken. And his first words are going to be 'what in the fuck was that?'" He stretched over the bed to pick up the phone.

"What in the blue fuck was that?" Bracken snapped at the other end of the line.

"I was close," Green murmured. Then: "How is she?"

Bracken grunted. "Asleep. She was asleep for most of it—even when she was...well, screaming for me to..." Green could actually hear Bracken's blush over the phone. Bracken, who had probably had every gender and humanoid

species under the sun, in every position possible and a few that technically weren't, was blushing. "She doesn't usually make demands," he finished uncomfortably. "At least not with me."

"Nor with me either," Green said gently. "They were Nicky's demands..."

"Nicky's?"

"She didn't tell you...Nicky, the rest of the care package in the car, lots of sex? Any of that ring a bell?"

"It's been a bitch of a day," Bracken snapped shortly. "We didn't get to her conversation with Nicky."

"Unfortunate."

Bracken snorted. "So, we're fast asleep, suddenly she starts making these really..." Again, that audible blush.

"Erotic?"

"Pornographic. Pornographic demands, and she's making them at the top of her lungs, and, well, I'm doing my best, but I'm only one sidhe, and then she's suddenly awake, and really surprised, and I smelled you—you were there with us—and then it was a big fucking wash of light and I practically came out my toes and when it was over, she said, *Well, that was weird*. And then she fell asleep."

"*Well, that was weird?*"

"She was too goddamned tired for poetry. What in the blue fuck happened?"

Green sighed, scrubbed his face with his hand. "Nicky was having a...rather crowded encounter, I was...visiting a friend, and Cory was, apparently, accosted in her sleep through her connection with Nicky. From Nicky to Cory, from me to Nicky—suddenly she wasn't just having sex in her dreams, she was having everybody's sex in her dreams. And because she does what she does during sex..."

"Power..." Bracken breathed. "But Green—where did it go? It was a fucking huge charge...I could feel it—if it was all of us, together, where did all that power go?"

"Into me," Green said simply, and then, with a hand stroking Twilight's lovely purple hair, he added, "And from me, into Funky Man—who's been healed. Completely. Even his scars are gone, Bracken—his hair grew back, he put on flesh—it's like his body had never been ravaged by power in the first place."

"Even his scars?" Bracken asked, then, his voice laced with pain, "Green...Adrian's scars didn't...did they?"

Green breathed deeply. "No. No, brother, they didn't. Because it was just Cory healing him, I think—that's not where her power lies. But this was Cory's power, through me. I'm good at healing—with a few exceptions."

"My heart is not your problem, leader," Bracken said lowly. "And it's not the issue here. This was huge—it was huge, and it was exhausting, and like I said, she had a bitch of a day—is this going to happen again?"

That was an excellent question. "She learned to control it before with practice—I think the more experience Nicky gets, the more he'll learn to close off that connection and she'll learn to block it as she feels it coming on. In the mean time..." Nicky would be there the morning after next, the afternoon at the latest. How much sex could he get in, considering that they would be on the road part of the time? "In the meantime, we'll just have to ask our little land yacht of love to keep their activities in check unless you two have some warning..."

"I think it only happens when she's asleep," Bracken interrupted thoughtfully. "If Nicky's new...lifestyle...started this afternoon, then it didn't hit Cory at all until now. I think I can handle it if we're together..."

"Well, given that Hollow Man is still out there, you don't have much choice, do you?"

Another grunt. Bracken could convey more in that one sound than many men could in a college thesis. "Not really."

"Anyway—we'll just make sure they call you before they make any more stops."

"Yeah, that's a phone call I want to get in the middle of class."

Green found himself laughing—Bracken as a student. He wished he could be there, could be home, to see the transition. Abruptly he sobered. "I want to be

home," he said softly. "This is the longest I've been away from home since nineteen-twelve." He had gone to Washington D.C., actually, lost and determined to legitimize his land deed by smooth talking, theft, and glamour, because otherwise, the government was claiming that his land was open to public development.

"We want you home," Bracken said softly. "If Funky Man is healed...if he remembers his name, can't you leave without him?"

Green blinked, and looked at the newly reborn Twilight, who was holding his hand up to the softly glowing ambience left over from the power surge, flexing his strong fingers, touching where his scars used to be. "I think, Bracken, that now I need to stay more than ever. If he's healed, he's got information, and information is exactly what we need. Take care of our beloved, brother. You won't have to shoulder that alone much longer."

Another grunt, this one with humor. "Good. A couple of nights like this would kill me."

"You'd go out with a smile."

"Amen."

And with that they rang off, leaving Green alone in the room with Twilight's quiet wonder, and Eric's sated snoring.

CORY

Around

The campus track was starting to feel like an old friend, and Davy's chatty, supportive presence wasn't uncomfortable either.

Renny ran beside me, lost in the pain of her own heart. She'd broken up with Max the same night Green and Nicky had invaded my dreams, and her hard won humanity, so tenuous after Mitch died, was gradually leaching away again. I made her come to school by telling her that she needed to keep Nicky up to date, but she'd started wearing those loose fitting wool sack dresses again, which was a bad sign. She had a high metabolism, but it was still colder here than in San Francisco, and she was just setting herself up to shed her humanity and start

running wild as a giant 100 lb. tabby cat again. I'd forced her to wear sweats today, ostensibly to keep me company on the track, and since she'd developed a quiet, almost pathological jealousy of Davy, it had worked.

Davy was oblivious to all of this. She seemed to find me almost irresistible as a friend, and Renny was simply a part of the whole package. I didn't understand the attraction—hell, considering my problems relating to my native species, it baffled me completely—but I did appreciate the company. Today, like most days, she was talking about her boyfriend, Kyle, her glossy ponytail bobbing jauntily behind her, and the fierce, bright wind whipping her purple scarf behind her. She had a number of these scarves—I'd asked her about them, and she said her mother crocheted them by the dozens, and when I asked her why she always wore them, she'd blushed charmingly and said, with a happy, brazen edge, "Hickies. Kyle loves to chew on my neck and they hide the hickies." I'd found myself blushing too, which, considering my own love life was pretty silly, but true nonetheless, and we'd giggled and jogged in silence for a while.

Today, I got to hear more about Kyle's job woes. Kyle had been out of work since June, but he still slept days because he liked night work. I'd never gotten a bead on exactly what it was Kyle did for a living, but that could be because until this week, I'd spent most of my time on the track wheezing like a broken accordion. Today, I was simply breathing hard, and I looked to the stands to show Bracken that I was getting better. Bracken was so relieved that I'd actually started looking him in the eyes after that really embarrassing night of channeling all of Nicky's sex demands into our own bed that he actually waved and smiled. We'd gone to our session with Hallow together today, and it just goes to show you how warped our life is that this was the least uncomfortable subject for us to bring up.

"So..." Hallow said after the whole thing just spilled out of us, "Did you enjoy it when you woke up?"

"I didn't mind it the whole time," Bracken had replied grumpily. "She's the one who seems to forget that sensual and consensual is the rule."

They both had turned to me then, waiting for my answer. I'd been red from my toenails up. "I came didn't I?" I asked hostilely. "And if Green hadn't been there in my head, I might have blown off the top of the goddamned hill, so maybe my sexual preferences aren't the problem here."

"And if Nicky hadn't been there in your head, you wouldn't have needed Green," Hallow had said reasonably, "So maybe we need to focus on whether or not these are your desires or his, so you can figure out a way to block him when he's in your head."

"We've already figured that out. All I need is a little warning," I replied, and even I knew I was being surly.

"But what about you, Cory?" Hallow asked patiently. "There's a difference between doing something in your dreams and being possessed to do something against your will—Bracken needs to know what it is you do and do not want."

I'd scowled into the teeth of his indulgent smile and had tried for some dignity. "Bracken has access to many of the most erotic moments of my sexual history in sculpture," I'd said distinctly. "If he needs to know about a particular act, he can always use the garden as a reference."

Bracken blinked, thought for a moment, and a truly lascivious grin had split his features. "I'll take that as a yes then," he'd said brightly. "That's excellent."

I'd scowled at him even more furiously and told him to shut up, but he'd been so happy to realize that what we'd done together hadn't been all Nicky's little orgy that he'd completely ignored me, and had spoken openly with Hallow about the night Green, Adrian, and I had created the erotic garden while I slumped in my chair and wished I was a hamster or something.

So now, seeing his smile and his relaxed wave, I thought that maybe my mortification had been worth his happiness. Then Renny spoke up from my side.

"I miss Green," she all but growled, and I knew that it wasn't just Green she missed, it was a person in her bed.

"So do I," I murmured, "But that's not going to help you and you know it."

"Who's Green?" Davy asked from my other side, and then before I could answer she went on in that careless, prattling way she had that I enjoyed but that drove Renny bonkers. "Because Kyle says his old boss was taken over by a guy named Green, and I could never figure out if Green was his first name or his last name although, you have to admit, it's a little strange as a first name, but it's common as a last name—I mean, it's your name, isn't it?"

"Kind of," I answered numbly, trying to sort out what she'd just said, because between this, and Kyle's love of hickies and the way he only slept at during the day and even Davy's odd attachment to me as a friend, a nasty suspicion was beginning form in the pit of my stomach. "Who was Kyle's old boss?"

"Some guy named Crispin, but I could never figure out if that was a first name or a last name either...are you okay?"

Because Renny and I had actually tripped in tandem and gone down, and I could feel my knee smarting on the all-weather, and hoped it wasn't bad enough for Bracken to make it bleed more.

"We're fine," I said quietly, putting my hand out to steady Renny's arm.

Renny met my eyes for the first time in days and said lowly, "She doesn't know, does she?"

I shook my head. All those guileless hints, all those blithe references to Kyle's work habits, to his love for chewing on her neck—all of it—she couldn't have just dropped that information off like clothes at a secondhand store if she'd realized her boyfriend was a vampire.

"I've got to go," Renny said, popping up like her knee didn't hurt. Knowing how fast were-creatures healed, it probably didn't, I thought sourly, but that didn't keep me from making a plea.

"Renny...no...you've got a class..."

"Consider it cut," she growled, and I could hear the change in her voice already, as we both flashed to that horrible, horrible moment in our lives when the world had exploded in crimson.

"Renny...you don't even have your cell phone..." I pleaded, because when we'd lived in San Francisco we'd started looping her cell phone around her neck so when she changed back from were-cat I could come bail her out. But she was already loping down the track in a graceful, cat-like trot, and Bracken and I looked at each other helplessly across the field.

"Where's she going?" Davy wanted to know. I looked at Davy now, not wanting to see if Renny actually waited until she was out of sight to morph into a kitty, and wondered what I was going to do with her now.

"She's going to see a Goddess about a cat," I said obliquely. "Hey—can I see your scarf?" I was acting on a hunch, based on Davy's odd attraction to me as a friend, and since we'd been about to start our cool down lap anyway, it wasn't as awkward as it would have been if we'd been running.

"That's nice," I said, running the textured fabric through my hands. It really was nice—Davy's mom didn't just go back and forth in rows, she did pretty stitch patterns and shells and post stitches and things, and it was truly an original work. But while my mouth was making the compliment, my mind was kicking itself in the ass. It was worse than I thought. I looked over to Bracken, who had watched me carefully since Renny and I had both tripped, and saw his grimace. Yes. This complicated things a bit, because instead of just glamorized vampire bites, which are what I'd expected to see, I also saw an unmistakable glow, this one in sort of a dark fluorescent green. It was bright enough for someone with power to see even from across the track and the football field. It was also the same glow I saw on my own neck every day, except hers was in one layer instead of three.

Davy wasn't just Kyle's lover—he'd marked her.

A vampire mark wasn't something you could take back or rescind or even apologize for. Adrian hadn't truly meant to mark me the three times he'd done so—he had loved me. His soul left his body, and it was drawn to me guilelessly, passionately, and when it blew through mine, his mark had stayed, binding me to him even tighter. If he'd marked me one more time, my mortality would have been tied to his. Bracken, I knew, still harbored a wound, a small hurt, that Adrian had never marked him, even though their relationship had been very different than ours.

We were too far away from Bracken for me to hear him speak, but I had no problem reading his lips. Shitfire indeed.

"You know," I said conversationally, after giving Davy back her scarf, "Green runs all sorts of businesses. I bet he could give Kyle a job if he needs it."

"Now who is he exactly?" Davy asked.

"He's my boss," I said truthfully. "Other than that, it gets complicated. I'll give you a card for the store where we work. If your boyfriend wants, he can come over and see Grace—she runs the shop. Even if Brack and I aren't there, she can give him an, uhm, interview and a place if he wants one."

"I don't see why he wouldn't want a job!" Davy said, so innocent she made my stomach ache. "I mean, I think his finances are getting pretty desperate."

We were rounding the track to the bleachers now, and I moved up the steps to where Bracken sat, and we sent speaking looks to each other as I rifled my backpack for my wallet. I pulled out the little card—blood-red with silver writing— Grace's little joke—and pulled down the terrycloth band that hid the puncture marks on my wrist, and casually brushed Bracken's hand. He called, just a little, and a single drop of blood welled up. I brushed the edge of the card on the blood, humming *Somebody Told Me* by The Killers as I did so, and nonchalantly handed the card to Davy, making sure the sweat from my fingers left a print.

"Give this to Kyle," I said, willing with my power that she not lose the card, or forget it. "We're working tonight and Thursday, and probably Saturday too, if he wants to talk to me directly."

"Awesome!" Davy tucked the card in the pocket of her sweatshirt, then beamed up at me with such sweetness that I wanted to weep. "Kyle will be thrilled!" And with that and a little wave she disappeared down the bleachers to finish her run (she did three miles to my one) and I plopped next to Bracken and leaned my head wearily on his shoulder.

"She doesn't know, does she?" he asked, knowing the answer.

"Not a clue," I told him sadly. "But at least it explains why she wanted to be my friend."

Bracken looked at me, puzzled. "The mark wouldn't do that. I think she just likes you."

A secret ache in my heart went away. "That's nice to know."

"Where's Renny?" Another question he knew the answer to.

"By now? On the bike trail, killing birds."

"Shit and damn," he murmured. "I wish she'd give Max a little more time."

I thought for a moment. "They will find a way," I said with surety. "Max has changed too much...hell, Renny has changed too much for them to give up on each other without more of a fight."

"You haven't changed at all," he said, looking at me thoughtfully.

"I don't wear black lipstick anymore."

A smile ghosted across his grim mouth. "But you still fight...well, everything." He moved a long fingered hand to the back of my neck. Almost absentmindedly he started pulling strands from my ponytail, fingering them smooth.

I scowled up at him. "What do you mean?"

"Hallow," he said softly. "You refuse to talk to him—which is too bad, because you've got some weight pressing you down. It would make your chest lighter, if you just talked."

I felt my scowl deepen, just so my face wouldn't crumple. "I do okay." I resisted the urge to pull away from that comforting hand.

"'Doing okay' is what was killing you before Christmas. You know that, don't you?"

I cringed. I'd refused to let Green heal me—I was afraid I would suck him dry, and the pain of denying him was so great, it hurt us both. "I don't want to hurt people with my own crap, okay?" Goddess I was dumb, I thought belatedly. You don't tell the elf, the multi-powerful sidhe who'd just given up an eternity of sensual pleasures with, well, whomever he cared to be with to live a scant lifetime with you, that you'd rather hurt yourself than hurt him. It was a grave freaking insult, that's what it was, but Bracken took it better than I expected.

"You hurt me by withholding it," he said softly. "I hurt when you hurt. We haven't made love—not really—since the night Green got in your head, and now Davy's a vampire's lover and Renny's falling apart and you're pulling further away from me. We need each other, Cory—not even in the romantic way—in the physical way of needing to feed emotionally from our own bodies. You pull away from me to help me, you kill me with kindness."

Fucking swell. One more thing to press against my lungs. Fine. "You want me to talk? Fucking groovy. I'll talk. You want to know what I'm feeling right now? What the weight is on my chest?" I pulled away from him abruptly, leaning my weight on my elbows and glowering at the track where the world's most innocent dinner trotted blithely around, unaware of the heartache she'd inflicted. He waited expectantly, but I couldn't speak right away. Instead, I sat

and watched her, hurting for her and for the naivety that was so charming, and would be gone so soon. The silence stretched until I could feel the cold from the metal bench steep through my sweats, and finally I could no longer hold onto the pressing weight on my chest, the one that had started small when Green had left, but had grown progressively harder to bear.

"I'm feeling overwhelmed," I said after a moment, the words hurting even as they passed through my throat. "I was supposed to hold the goddamned fort, not rally the fucking troops to fight the bad guys. Green left, and it sucked, but I thought I could hold it all together. And then Hollow Man attacked, and Grace's past burst in on us, and we had exploding people in the basement and Renny broke up with Max and Nicky decided to go all free love on me, and Green got delayed with maybe the saddest freaking sidhe of all freaking time, and I'm failing my stupid physics class and now after all my resolve to try to relate to my own goddamned native species, it turns out that the one friend I made is in mortal danger because she's not quite mortal after all. The only thing I've managed in the last two and a half weeks is my fucking yarn."

I wasn't crying, I thought proudly. I was whining like a baby girl, but I wasn't crying. I used to be so tough, and this winter I'd cried more than in my entire life previously, but not today. Today I wasn't crying.

Then Bracken leaned over my back, put his chin on my shoulder and wrapped his arm around my waist. "Now was that so hard?" he asked, doing a fair imitation of Hallow.

"Yes," I growled, and he breathed a little laugh into my ear. It made my stomach clench, and my nipples tingle, just that little breath next to my ear.

"Was it worth it? Do you feel better?" His large warm hand came up to the small of my back, and I suddenly doubted my ability to stand.

"It was worth it," I said carefully, truthfully. I suddenly felt stronger, more able than I had since I'd watched Green's yellow hair disappear into the drab airport. "Are you sure I haven't changed?"

"Since I had to force you to say it, I'd say only a little," he laughed again, and moved his other hand to my thigh, making me shudder.

"Enough to love?" I asked plaintively, another weight pressing down where the first one had left off.

"I'd love you if you didn't change," he murmured. "I love you now that you have changed. Anyway I'd love you, *due'ane*," he murmured, and that did nothing to stop the sudden wanting. We'd had no heart for more than perfunctory lovemaking since the night my brain exploded with other people's sex and now I was aching fiercely to have him inside of me.

"I love you too, *due'alle*." I choked. And then, unnecessarily, because the must flooding my panties would be as clear to him as baking cookies to a human, I said through a mouth dry as crumbs, "I want you."

"If you don't shower, we've got forty-five minutes before physics," he whispered against my ear, and I actually gasped with desire.

"Where..."

"That little room...where we changed..." he muttered brokenly, and then I was up, trotting down the bleachers, knowing he'd be right behind me with our packs.

The room was thankfully empty, and Bracken froze the knob with power even as he closed the door behind us. I went to strip off my sweatshirt when Bracken came behind me and seized the hem, pulling it over my head before I could even gasp. His hands came to the band of my sweatpants and of a sudden I was naked, without even time to be cold in the chill little room because his mouth was devouring mine, his large massy body covering my small one, his hands everywhere, burning and kneading and touching. Before I even knew that he was naked too, he'd whirled me around and literally sat me upon his body, sliding, stretching, pushing into me where I was swollen and bursting with the need to have him.

With his hands on my hips he moved me, up and down over his shaft, dragging, stretching, pounding, inside of me, and I pressed my hands against the wall and made broken sounds of pleasure into my arm, his body essential to mine. I shivered, from my toes up, my eyes exploding in stars, my orgasm ripping a groan from me that I could feel down to my womb, and then he was there, coming, coming, flooding my body with his seed, clutching my breasts from behind me and groaning into my ear while I shuddered again, and one more time, in aftershocks and pleasure and love.

When it was over we stood, embracing, panting in the chill barren room, the smell of sex filling it, heating it with the fury and the power that was us.

Our shaking hands eventually stilled, and he helped me back into my clothes, using my underwear to clean me off before throwing them in the little trashcan in the corner. I flashed to the last time we'd used this room and a smile quirked my lips even as I collapsed on the formaldehyde couch.

"I think we just justified the existence of panties, Bracken."

He laughed a little too, and came to hold me in his lap. "I think we also proved someone's theory of spontaneous combustion," he murmured, and I chuckled a little more. There was quiet, as we took advantage of the last ten minutes before we had to get moving, but Bracken, being Bracken, was not content to let the silence stay.

"Don't ever be embarrassed in front of me," he said seriously, and instead of cringing, or even replying, I leaned against him and closed my eyes. Maybe I needed to hear this. "Don't ever be mortified because of sex. Don't be embarrassed because you're uncertain, or afraid, or overwhelmed. You work very hard to be a leader, but you get upset if your *due'alle* is forced to kneel to you. You refuse to show me weakness, or lean on me for support, but you get angry if I go to Hallow, or to Green to see what's going on inside your head. Don't you see, Cory? I'm your release valve. I'm the lover who can be your equal, who can be...I'm the most human lover you will have."

I looked at him, his alien beauty, his ferocious size, his over-large eyes, and the irony was almost funny. Except he was right. My relationship with Bracken was the closest thing I would ever know to a human mating—hadn't the other night proved exactly that?

"Give me time, Bracken Brine," I said softly. "I'm the most human Goddess' child you will ever know. I'm bound to three different men and it's all about finding a balance to the three of you, okay?"

"Okay," he murmured. "Okay. Just remember I'm on your side of the teeter-totter, yes?"

I smiled, suddenly a little misty when dumping my crap all over his lawn didn't do it. "Hey that's almost poetry. That's awesome."

"I learn from the best," he said, kissing my forehead and then shouldering our packs to lead the way to class.

"You're the second person to say that to me..." I murmured. "What the hell

does it mean?"

But he only laughed and took my hand as we walked through the blue and brown shadows of the campus.

When we sat down in Physics, I was surprised when he handed me my knitting instead of my physics folder. This was, unequivocally, the one class I didn't knit in. I made a sound of protest in my throat, but he just looked at me levelly from those brackish eyes and said "You knit and think. I'll take notes." I opened my mouth a few times and blinked, but he closed my backpack calmly, and sat with my notebook on his lap.

"I mean it, Cory," he said, and the tone of his voice was the kind I only argued with during a knock-down drag-out, which I was so not prepared to have right now.

"The professor will have kittens," I said, stunned, even as my fingers found their way across the knitting and my heartbeat slowed down as the wool/silk blend absorbed all my stress.

"Good," my beloved replied serenely. "We can take one home. You need a pet, and the sprites need something to do." And that was that—when Mario and La Mark sat down near us, they raised their eyebrows, then took in Bracken's bland expression and shrugged. The professor's eyes bulged out, but Bracken looked at him levelly, and the man paled a little and went back to his lecture.

More vectors, I thought miserably, but the yarn beckoned, Bracken would explain it to me much more clearly than this banana would, and I had other things on my mind.

That night he wore my sweater to work.

I glowed for the first two hours, as we waited on customers and stocked shelves, and then Davy walked in with a medium sized, thick-chested vampire who looked extraordinarily pissed off. My glow sort of faded after that.

"Davy—nice to see you," I said sincerely. Part of my motivation behind issuing the invitation for Kyle to become part of our kiss was to keep Davy safe.

"I'm glad you're here," she said, and although her smile was genuine, her eyes flashed unhappily to the man beside her. "I've been trying to tell Kyle that you're for real, but he seems to think you wouldn't give him a job if he was the

last guy on earth.”

I pulled a reassuring smile from somewhere around my toes. "Don't worry — here—you look around, and Kyle and I will go in back and interview, okay?"

I looked up casually at Kyle and tried to order him with my eyes to comply. He gave a hard nod, his chiseled chin looking like it might shatter with tension, and I turned back to Davy, who was glancing around the store curiously. "Hey— you've got a pretty big yarn section—do you think I could look at that? My mom wants to make me another scarf."

"No problem." I turned around to call for Bracken and found that he was right behind me, and in the process to raising his hands to my shoulders so he didn't startle me silly, which he did anyway. I muffled a shriek, and our eyes met and there wasn't any amusement at all in either of us, but I kept my voice light anyway. "Beloved—how about you show Davy the new shipment we got in today, and I'll go talk to Kyle, okay?"

"Are you sure?" he asked lowly, and his eyes flickered to Kyle, who was now looking both awed and uneasy. He obviously saw through Brack's glamour and was wondering if it was a trap.

"Grace is back there," I said easily. "She can help with the interview."

Bracken nodded and exchanged a long, hard look with the vampire at my back, and then moved off with Davy so smoothly that she didn't even cast any anxious looks behind her back.

"C'mon in back," I said tersely, moving from behind the register and gesturing for Renny to take over. Renny had been waiting by the car in cat form after class, and had been so contrite about running off that I'd told her she could make it up to me by helping at the store tonight. There was a truck and inventory to count and the whole little mall itself was having a big post-Christmas promotion, so it was busy enough to justify her help.

Kyle followed me through the store and we both crowded into the miniscule office, where Grace was already doing paperwork.

"Cory, couldn't it wai...good grief. Who the fuck are you?"

Kyle actually looked relieved at the rudeness of the greeting, as though making nice to keep Davy happy had put him under a great deal of strain.

"I'm a guy hoping this isn't a fucking ambush is who I am," he growled back, then turned to glare at me. "What in the hell is this about anyway?" And he pulled out my card, which, to the three of us, was glowing with power, practically singing with the compulsion for Kyle to come and speak to me.

I swallowed. "You're in danger," I said baldly. "You're in danger. There is a big bad mother fucker out there, and he's leveling vampires and you're all alone. Davy said you're 'looking for a place'—is that true?"

"Well yeah—but not with you!" He looked incredulous and baffled, as though he couldn't believe we were actually having this conversation—maybe the compulsion I'd put on that card was stronger than I'd planned.

"Why the hell not?" Grace asked, clearly affronted on my behalf.

"He's one of Crispin's," I said lowly.

"Oh." Abruptly, Grace sat down on a counter still littered with paperwork. "I didn't know any of them survived."

"Only those of us who didn't go to fight that night," Kyle replied, looking embarrassed.

"Why not?" I asked, and met his eyes. They were brown, deep, plain brown, and he tried to bespell me for a minute, I think just to see if he could. He quit trying, then looked away. "So why didn't you go?" I asked again, and he shrugged.

"Sezan...he was crazy. A certifiable lunatic. And...he did something to Crispin...I mean, Crispin wasn't the most compassionate guy in the first place but...but by the end there, his brain was mush and crap and not much else. I..." And now he looked me in the eyes, and his own expression was filled with a deep shame. "I was there, when they brought your friend to Crispin." He jerked his chin in the direction of the front, and I realized he was talking about Renny. Renny had been kidnapped the morning before Adrian had been killed, as an incentive to make us all go confront Sezan, Crispin, and the other vampires. "She was...she could hardly speak to human beings, she was so damaged inside. We'd killed her beloved as nothing more than an experiment, to see if it would work, and now we were using her as bait and...and it wasn't fair. I looked at her and thought, if we had to destroy someone that fragile to get what we wanted...maybe we were on the wrong side. The sun set that night, Crispin gave

the call from Sezan's van, and everybody flew out. Except I veered off at the last minute and went back and got my stuff and...and I've been on my own ever since."

He swallowed then, a reflexive action, and for all his burly toughness, I saw what this admission cost him.

"Join us," I said bluntly.

"No." And still, that vulnerability. "I'm a deserter, and a traitor, but your people...I kept wondering when Crispin's people were going to come after me...and then, a month later, I met a were-coyote who told me...you killed them. I don't know how you did it, but your people..." He looked at me directly now. "What kinds of monsters can completely eradicate an entire kiss?"

I felt myself pale, and wondered if my knees would buckle, and I knew Grace had put out a hand to catch me if I fell. I waved her away, but when I spoke, it was from a raw throat.

"You love Davy, don't you?" I asked, holding onto my thready voice. "You marked her—that takes a commitment that humans can't even dream of."

He met my gaze then, and I could tell he was wondering if I was threatening him, and I thought wretchedly that I was doing this all wrong.

"Yeah I love her."

"And if something happened to her...if she came riding to your rescue and trying to help you and she disappeared into a rain of blood before your eyes—what would you do?"

And his expression became fierce, his jaw started to extend and his eyes started to whirl redly in a true hunting face. "I'd murder the world," he growled.

I nodded, and felt my own face and throat tense so badly I hoped I could speak. "Of course you would. You say that and you believe you'd really murder the world, but you know what, tough guy? That's only because you're pretty sure you can't really do it." I was wearing a hooded sweatshirt, and I reached up and pulled the front of it down on the left, and I could tell by the way he stepped back that the full depth of the three marks glowing from my neck hit him. "I got this third one when your boss blew up my beloved, and he blew through me. And then my other beloved held me and I tried to murder the world. And let me tell

you, it was a lot easier to do than it has been to live with so you think long and hard about what you want for yourself and what you want for Davy before you think that's the solution to protecting your lover, okay?"

"You...all by yourself...you did that?" He hadn't heard a word I said, I thought miserably. He was still back at the part where I killed his entire kiss.

"There wasn't a force on earth that could have stopped me," I told him evenly.

"Is there now?" he asked, backing up a step.

"Absolutely," I nodded, and the first tear rolled down my nose and I ignored it. "It's called regret."

Kyle nodded then, helplessly. "And you want me to join you?" And I winced at the horror in his voice.

"It doesn't have to be me," I murmured, and wiped futilely at the tears falling freely now. "Andres...he's in San Francisco—he could keep you safe. You could live here and blood with Andres—that's not a problem..."

"Crispin would have killed me before he let me sit on someone else's territory," Kyle snapped.

"Well Crispin's dead and I've already told you I don't take lives lightly," I snapped back. "Don't you get it, asshole? This isn't about what I did last summer, and it's not about your friends...it's about you, and it's about Davy. You are naked, and alone, and...Kyle, this thing out there...it did a fly by—just a fly by, mind you, no actual contact—and every vampire for a five mile radius who hadn't bled with me keeled over for a good half-an-hour..."

"You bled them?" he asked, and it was like everything I said, he was back three steps trying to catch up.

"Yes, I bled them. Adrian gave them to me with the third mark—how can I run his kiss without bleeding them?"

Kyle looked blindly to Grace, such utter incomprehension written over his broad features that I couldn't even fathom what he didn't understand. "Did Adrian bleed you all?"

Grace nodded. "Of course he did—how else could he run his kiss?"

Kyle shivered. "You people—that's...it's...Crispin told us it was...sacred. Holy. Like marriage. He only blooded us if we'd done something to really please him."

I blinked. "It is," I said honestly. "It is sacred, and it is holy, and...and like any good marriage, it's protection. Kyle—the vampires I blooded got queasy, but they didn't collapse. Being tied to me...or even being tied to a leader...it keeps you safe. The Hollow Man—he sucked the power out of a full blooded sidhe, you understand that?"

"How is that possible?" he asked, and he apparently tabled the other part for later so he could deal with it on his own terms.

"I don't know...but Green found him...he was so ravaged, he couldn't even remember his name...he had scars, Kyle...scars and lice from living on the street—do you know how hard it is for the Goddess' shining ones to become so stripped..."

"Goddess..." He blinked, and then, his eyes sharpened. "*Had* scars? Did you kill him?"

And now I blinked. "No...we healed him," I said, feeling lost and muddled and like I couldn't in a million years make contact.

Kyle sat down on the office chair Grace had left vacant, and he sat so abruptly, the wheels skidded backwards until the back hit the counter, but he didn't even notice. "You healed him? How is that possible?"

I blew out a breath and mopped up the last of my tears. "I wield a great deal of power under...certain circumstances," I murmured. "I've only committed mass murder once—the rest of the time we try to do something constructive with it, okay?"

"You healed him?"

"Green healed him. I was the battery."

Kyle nodded, then shook his head. "You people are a real mindfuck, do you know that? I'm so lost...you killed my entire kiss and now you want to take me under your wing like a giant mama bird?"

"I killed the people who murdered my beloved." I told him in a stony little

voice. "Don't forget that, sir vampire. Don't forget what you'd do yourself to protect your loved one. The Hollow Man has seen us together, Kyle. He's knocked Renny and me down when we've been on the track with Davy. I don't know how clearly he sees mortals—all he saw were three girls with brown pony-tails, running. When I saw she had a vampire mark, I almost hyperventilated—if he can't really see who we are, what's going to keep him from attacking her instead of me? She's defenseless, Kyle! Like a kitten. Whatever you decide, you need to remember that you can't watch her all the time, and I can. You're limited by the night, and I'm not. And that I love Davy too."

Kyle scrubbed his face with his hands, then ran a hand through his sandy brown hair while he was shaking his head.

"I don't even know your goddamned name," he said after a moment.

"Cory," I said, surprised.

"That's not all your name," he murmured, then held up a hand when I opened my mouth to reply. "No. Don't tell me. Or don't tell me why you can't tell me. I just need to know what to call you in my head, when I think about your offer."

I grimaced at Grace, and she raised amused eyebrows at me. I wasn't going to say it, so she did. "Lady Cory," she said softly. "She's our Lady, our Queen, *ou'e'eir* to our Lord Green, *due'ane* to Bracken, *ou'e'ane* to Nicky."

My face flushed, harshly and deeply, and I looked away. "Lady Cory will do fine," I said through a gravelly throat, shaking my head and resisting the unqueenly urge to hiss "Gees, Grace..." under my breath.

Kyle nodded. "Lady Cory—Vampire Queen and Elf Lover—gotcha." And then he sighed, and met my eyes. "I'll think about it, my Lady. It's a good offer—I know I'm stupid, and about three steps behind what's going on in the world, but even I can recognize you're making this offer from a good heart. I just don't know if it's enough."

I nodded and looked away, and then was struck by a sudden thought. "Look—Kyle—don't just talk to me, okay?" I started searching the counter for a stack of business cards that Grace and I kept handy, and I found the two I wanted and handed them to the handsome, beleaguered vampire in front of me. "Here—this one is Andres' card. He'll be waiting for your call. This one's for a hotel

reservation in San Francisco—there are darkling rooms and everything." I swallowed and felt embarrassment flood me. "Take Davy—it's a real ritzy place, she'll like it. You can talk to Andres while you're there."

Kyle looked at the two cards, surprised. "Thank you, I guess," he said with half a smile.

"Just..." I sighed. "Just consider us, please? If not me, Andres." I ran my own hand through my hair, forgetting that it was longer now and in a pony-tail. The elastic band sproinged off and hit the back wall, but none of us noticed. "It's a big, scary world out there when you're alone in it...believe me, it was bad enough when I was just a gas station clerk—I can't imagine what it's like to be alone when you know the monsters are real."

Kyle nodded and turned around, shouldering his way through the small doorway and leaving Grace and I alone in the little room. Grace slipped a cool arm around my shoulders and I leaned into her gratefully.

"Does Green know?" she asked softly.

"Know what?"

"That you're still carrying that weight from the night Adrian died."

I looked away and shrugged, hearing his voice in my head even as I thought about it. *Of course I know, beloved.* His voice in my mind was stronger, *closer*, than it had been since he left; Green was coming home to me. The knowledge filled me, gave me the strength and heart that had been sucked right out of me after Kyle had walked away, and when I answered Grace, his presence was shining out of my smile.

"Of course he knows," I murmured happily. "Green knows everything."

Grace leaned in for a hug, and I leaned back into her cool, rigidly vampiric body, which somehow felt warm and maternal to me because she was Grace. "He's on his way home, isn't he?"

I nodded. "I need to go tell Bracken—he'll be thrilled to get rid of me for a day or two."

"Doubt it," was the prompt reply, then, "What can we do about Kyle?"

I shivered. "Not a blessed thing. It really is his decision. Maybe we can ask

some of the sprites to baby-sit Davy, though." I bit my lip, thinking. "I'm really worried about her, Grace. Me, Renny, Davy...he could be after me or Renny and get her by mistake..." I shuddered. All that innocence...it was too awful for words.

Grace nodded. "I hear you—but you're going to have to get Green or Bracken to talk to the sprites."

"They like me," I said hopefully, and then ventured up front to see Davy off.

BRACKEN

And Around

She would have been okay then, if her mother hadn't walked into the store immediately after the vampire and his perky little human left.

She came out of the back room glowing so brightly I thought I had misinterpreted the evil look the big vampire had given me when he emerged.

"How'd it go?" I asked, curious. It was vampire business—even Adrian hadn't let me in on vampire business.

Suddenly her glow dimmed, and she flutter-touched my back to comfort herself. "It really sucked," she said softly. "But I gave him Andres' card, and maybe he'll turn to Andres. I'd like to find some way to protect Davy, but it will have to be subtle—he won't like it if he thinks he can't do it himself." Then she smiled again, shyly, brightly, "But Green is coming home...he's getting close—probably tomorrow morning, I think."

And that brightened me up too. The perky human came up and smiled at us so guilelessly I was sure her vampire had convinced her that all was well.

"Thanks, Cory," she was gushing. "Kyle's more optimistic than he's been in weeks—and I'm sure my mom will like the yarn..." She held up her purchase bag, emblazoned with the same wreath Cory had tattooed on her back and that I had around my wrist and up my arm. "This was really awesome of you."

Cory gave a passable imitation of a real smile. "Any time," she murmured.

"I'll see you on the track tomorrow, right?"

Cory hesitated. "Maybe not, actually. We've got...family...coming home from a trip tomorrow, we may need to be here."

Davy looked disappointed. "Oh...well, I'll run without you then..."

Cory met Kyle's eyes cautiously, and he nodded and touched her shoulder with reverent fingers. "Actually, babe, how about you wait until Cory's there to go with you, okay?"

Davy met Kyle's gaze, and his eyes glowed, but only faintly because she loved him and he knew it and didn't want to hurt her fragile mortal mind. "Okay," she murmured happily, then she gave Cory a quick hug which surprised us both and took his hand and led him out of the store without hardly another word.

Cory sighed. "I hate this," she said softly.

"He loves her," I said, because it was true and I didn't want her to worry about this thing with everything else she had on her mind.

"You and I both know that's not always enough, beloved," she murmured, taking my hand in hers and kissing it. Then she moved to take the register from Renny, who was looking peaked and trapped and who probably needed to change into a kitty cat and curl up in the stockroom from a nap.

I went back to stocking shelves around the unexpected crowds of humans, and then I felt, rather than saw, her flare of panic. It seemed to zing the whole store, filling it with tension, and when I looked towards the door I could see why.

I had met Cory's mother twice before—both times she had struck me as having both the best and the worst of what humanity has to offer. In appearance she was smallish—although taller than her daughter—and slightly built. One of those vital, stringy, active women that seemed to grow tougher as she aged. She wore her hair in two graying braids, wrapped around her head, probably for much the same reason Cory wore hers short for so long—it was convenient and easy—and dressed in jeans and T-shirts or sweatshirts—again, much like Cory. She loved her daughter—a thing Cory did not (in typical human fashion) seem to be sure of, but it was a tense, uneasy kind of love, like the love of your own image in a warped mirror. That odd human thing of not liking everything your child showed you about yourself seemed to slip between her love for her child and good intentions more often than was comfortable for any of us. If she warned Cory against getting fat one more time I was truly going to lose my temper with the woman.

But what came out of her mouth as she rushed towards her daughter was more alarming and potentially more hurtful than that.

"You're married?" She practically screeched across the store, and the shining flush that Cory had worn since she'd told me Green was on his way

disappeared, leaving her cheeks the color of old linen.

"Oh shit," she replied, her eyes big in panic.

"Well are you?" And Mrs. Kirkpatrick was upon her, face to face across the register, and I didn't even have time to put my box down and arrive at Cory's rescue before the scrap was on.

"Who told you that?" Cory asked, although we both knew it could only be that dickhead's mother, because he had threatened, and this was the only weapon he had.

"Justine Granger." And Cory didn't look surprised. "She said her son saw you selling drugs with some guy on campus you claimed to be your husband."

And now Cory was infuriated. "She said *what*? Her fuckheaded son almost ripped my arm off trying to score and he told her /was selling? And you believed them—without even asking me?"

And her anger must have pushed past her mother's fury, because now it was Mrs. Kirkpatrick stepping back in surprise. "Well, Cory...I mean...we know you did in high school..."

"The fuck I did," Cory shot back, totally oblivious to the stares she was attracting. Her cheeks went an uneven crimson, and in this moment she was the angry, hostile child that Adrian had been courting, and I was shamed by my words earlier in the day. She had changed—she had become a better person than this, and I had not seen it. "I wasn't stoned, mother, I was pissed off, and I'm getting there again now, so you had better just back the fuck off of this topic because I'm at work and you're in the wrong, okay?"

I was standing helplessly, again, at Cory's side by now, and Renny, who had heard the beginnings of the argument, came up to take Cory's place at the register. Cory looked at Renny's peaked, anxious face, and an extraordinary thing happened. She took a deep breath, and right there in her mother's presence became Lady Cory, Corinne Carol-Anne Kirkpatrick op Crocken Green, the woman I'd been accustomed to having at my side.

"I'm sorry, Renny," she said, and her face paled from its first blotchy flush of anger, leaving two spots of color on her cheekbones. "You go back and take your break, sweetie—I'll be fine."

"Are you sure?" But Renny looked tired, and sad, and even I wished her a nice nap in a knot of tawny fur.

"Yeah. I'm sure. I'm all done shouting—you go sleep." Renny turned then, and with a few anxious backwards glances retreated to the stock room, shedding her sweatshirt even as she left. "So, Mom," Cory said then on an even, controlled breath, "Why did you come by?"

Mrs. Kirkpatrick flushed. "Are you married?"

Cory nodded. "Yes. Yes, I got married before Christmas."

And then came the hurt that was the root of all the anger. "Why didn't you tell us? You didn't invite anybody..."

"It was a...uhm...a very private ceremony," Cory said, blushing, and I put my hand on her shoulder in support. Private indeed, I thought unhappily. Humans did big ceremonies—pretty dresses, flowers, sunshine and poetry. For that matter, elves usually did too. Cory had been married against her will and without her knowledge, not just once but twice, and both times in my bed, when, as much as I knew she loved me, I had not been her first choice. Of course, by the time Christmas had rolled around, I had become a necessity to her by both heart and will, and so I could live with everything that came before, but still...

"Private!" Her mother was saying. "It was so private I don't even know who you're married to!"

A totally adult expression crossed Cory's face—so adult, so ageless, if I didn't know any better, I'd say it was elfish. "Well, Mom," she said with a wry smile, "Who do you think I'm married to?"

Mrs. Kirkpatrick's gaze flickered from my possessive hand on Cory's shoulder to her wry, adult face, but Cory wasn't stupid and her mother wasn't either. "I saw you on Christmas," she hissed, as though I couldn't hear her. "I saw the way Mr. Green looked at you. I saw the way that Nicky kid flirted. Don't act like it's a given...I know you loved Adrian this summer—how can you recover this quickly...marriage is forever, Cory."

Again, that elfish flicker of the lips. "Mother, you're not telling me anything I don't know," she murmured. "Bracken and Green are still mourning Adrian too—we always will. Can't you be happy that I'm married to a man who loves me unselfishly? If you want to believe that I'm married to three of them,

well, that certainly makes me look like something special, doesn't it?"

It was as though she were born to equivocate like elves, I thought with grudging admiration. As much as it had irritated me when she used this same tactic with me, I don't think I could have walked such a fine line, and I've been living with God's limitation on the Goddess' get for my entire eighty years on the planet.

Mrs. Kirkpatrick swallowed, and I could tell Cory had won. Not even someone as tough and as pragmatic as Ellen Kirkpatrick could tell her daughter to her face that she wasn't that special, and admitting that her daughter could possibly be married to three men was quite out of the realm of human possibility. "I don't see a ring," she said at last, with dignity, and finally, (finally!) I had something to contribute.

"They're on order," I told her quickly, saving Cory the pain of having to equivocate again.

The look my beloved gave me was well worth the time and effort I'd put into choosing the rings and then asking the fey goldsmiths in Colfax to make them. (Faerie metalworkers are a sour, bitchy sort of elf—not pleasant to work with at all.)

"Really?" Cory asked, and there was nothing in her voice but vulnerable, beleaguered woman, thrilled at seeing one good moment in a whole host of bad ones.

"Really," I told her, and bent to her ear, "All four of them."

A charmed smile blossomed across her face, making her humanly plain features so lovely that every one of Green's people in the store actually turned to smile at her as she aimed that smile at me. Then she aimed that smile at her mother, her eyes bright and clear. "I'm going to have a wedding ring," she proclaimed proudly.

"Well are you going to have a ceremony to go with it?" Her mother shot back, and it hurt to watch that smile fade.

"Mom...we've already..." she began at the same time I said, "We can if you would like."

Cory's eyes met mine. "Can we?"

Why not, I thought. We could have a ceremony that would satisfy Cory's family but that would leave those of us who were the Goddess' children under no illusions as to whom she was bound to, and in what ways. "Sure," I said, swallowing. Suddenly I felt the weight of making her happy resting on my shoulders and it had never felt so burdensome. "We can have it in the Goddess Grove...we'll have to talk to Green, of course...and Nicky..."

"Why Green and Nicky?" Christ was that woman sharp.

"It's Green's garden too, mother," Cory said acidly. Then she spoke to me, with that soft, wanting, charmed and thrilled woman's voice and I thought that I'd dance on cold steel to get her to keep talking to me like that. "We could...when, do you think..."

"After finals," I said hopefully. Surely Hollow Man would be dead and neutralized by then. Surely we would be safe enough this summer, and Cory could have some desperate peace, and some time to celebrate her relationships instead of fret about how to make them work.

"Summer in the Grove..." She smiled a misty, wistful smile. "It's everything I wouldn't have known how to plan, really..." Suddenly she looked up, realizing that a small line had formed behind her mother. "Mom, give me a second," she murmured. "I'm working here."

And surprisingly enough her mother did move, and Cory proceeded to do her job, sparing a smile and brief comment on purchases as she did so. An older woman came up and Cory recognized not only the customer, but her purchase.

"You decided to get more?" she asked, fondling the same sort of yarn that had gone into my sweater.

"Well my first project came out so wonderfully—my husband actually wears it!"

Cory cast a shy, sideways glance at me. "So does mine," she said, infused with quiet pride.

Her mother left shortly after that, with a sniff and a promise (or a threat!) to be in touch shortly to ask about wedding plans, the rush eased, the store closed, and as I came up behind her, my beloved surprised me by leaning her full weight against me.

"Is everything done?" she asked, and I checked with the two vampires who had come in after hours to help stock and count, and they nodded. Renny came padding out of the stock room, a neatly tied bundle of clothes in her mouth, and Cory rubbed her tawny ears for a moment, still leaning on me. "What day is it?" she asked suddenly, as Renny bumped her hand for more stroking.

I blinked, checked the calendar at the register and said "The eleventh...why..." Then suddenly remembering human conventions I asked with a bit of panic, "The fourteenth is Valentines day, isn't it?"

That got me a tired chuckle. "Yeah...don't worry, Bracken—you haven't missed anything." And still she leaned against me, taking as many moments as she dared, I guess, to shore up her courage. Then: "Beloved—would you mind taking a walk in the Goddess grove with me tonight?"

I sucked in my breath, unsure of how to answer, when she saved me by saying, "Don't worry, I don't think he'll be there." And suddenly I was equal parts shame and relief.

"I'd be happy to," I murmured, wrapping my arms around her more securely and squeezing as tightly as I dared.

Her body relaxed another fraction, then tightened again, and she said out of nowhere, "Green's coming home, people. He'll be here by the morning. Let's go home."

Everyone in the store heard her, and a quiet cheer went out. I could see her quiet smile, even though I couldn't see her face. With a little sigh, she turned into my chest and murmured, "The rings are a wonderful gift, Bracken. I can't thank you enough."

"You haven't seen them yet," I mumbled, embarrassed.

She tilted her head up and I saw her tired, happy, distant eyes. "You thought of them. For me, I know—you guys wear studs in your ears sometimes, but mostly, you don't do jewelry." She stood on tip-toe and I bent down and she kissed my cheek. "It's a lovely thought. I can't wait to see them. Thank you."

Then, without looking at me, she moved away, hand on Renny's head, and I couldn't shake the feeling that there was something I had missed about the conversation, something I should know about but didn't.

The feeling didn't leave me as she took my hand and walked me up to the garden. It had started raining as we'd left work—that hard, insistent rain that came this time of year in Northern California and promised not to stop for at least two weeks. It was an unfortunate rain—in the valley it would flood plains and threaten levies, and there were always places like Rio Linda and the Delta that would have to evacuate families; places where sandbag brigades would become a common duty for volunteer firemen. Up here in the foothills, it meant that the mornings would not be nearly so chilly—gloves, hats, and scarves often littered the SUV when we piled out after traveling from the foothills to the valley, and in the areas surrounding Green's hill snow was common enough to be a nuisance instead of a delight. Of course, with the lack of cold would come prematurely melting snow, swollen streams, flash flooding and land the consistency of a Florida swamp—even on Green's hill, where weather could be controlled by magic, water saturation was a simple fact of physics.

Tonight the rain in the Goddess grove was mitigated by the power that had made it, that was still inside Cory's fragile mortal body and that Green wielded through her. It fell down in a gentle mist, and although it was by no means warm it was certainly not a deterrent to the two female bodies, naked and pale and gleaming in the wet and in the ever present ambience that came from the grove itself.

Cory made a little hum in her throat when she saw them, and then, recognizing the women as Ellen Beth and Sweet, she made another sound, this one more like sympathy and dismay, and seized my hand to haul me away from the loveliness that would always be two women making love. (Of course I stopped to watch. I am male and I am sidhe and there is nothing to apologize for in appreciating beauty.)

To my surprise, instead of just retreating to our bedroom, Cory kept hauling at my hand and we ended up on the grounds below the hill, Green's gardens. This time of year they were all crocuses and pinks and daffodils—these were flowers that bloomed in the lower parts of the foothills in winter, and they made sense here, where it was warmer than the surrounding areas, but still winter. There was still light streaming out from the three levels of windows that wrapped around the house, and the garden itself was alive with the tinier fey and the occasional vampire. It occurred to me that Green's hill really never slept.

When we found the grove of lime trees that made up the original part of the gardens, Cory actually stopped and took a breath and turned around to grin at

me, a little embarrassed by what we had seen on the crown of the hill.

"I forget sometimes," she said, shaking her head.

"Forget what?"

"That making love in public places is not just for me and the men in my life," she said, exhaling on a laugh.

"We've never..." I started and then remembered our first time, in a skeezy warehouse in front of forty vampires, and I think even I flushed.

Cory laughed softly, and sat abruptly in front of a tree, leaning against it, ignoring the sopping grass and the ever-present mist coming down from the sky. She was in such an odd mood that for once I skipped the lecture about her health. "I don't think Green and I have ever..." She shrugged. "But then, we made the Goddess grove, so I guess that counts as public."

"Nicky?" I asked carefully. She had never given me details about date night, or how it had ended in such a way that it would destroy so much of her joy.

"Under the stars," she said, trying for casual. She failed, looking away from me. "It felt really good," she murmured. "I didn't know it could feel that good with someone who didn't make the earth move just by breathing."

I sat next to her and took her hand. "I am a sidhe, remember? I do understand about lust and pleasure."

"Yeah," she murmured. "But you gave it all up for me."

"It wasn't a hardship," I told her truthfully. It hadn't been. Being with her and only her was so simple and lovely I didn't know how to put it into words. And she was so complicated that practically every act of love making was like seducing someone new.

"I can't do..." She turned her head, looked me in the eyes. "I don't understand how the human heart can be so complicated. Ellen Beth and Sweet...I get that. After Adrian died, Green and I would have just dissolved into one big howl of pain if he hadn't been inside me to fill some of that void. It almost doesn't have anything to do with love, although I love Green so terribly...I don't understand how I can love the two of you so very terribly

that..." Her voice trailed off. "My heart can do it so easily, but my brain can't explain it. I can't explain how just sitting in this garden with you makes me feel whole, but at the same time, if Green wasn't going to be here tomorrow I'd fragment in a million pieces. I can't explain why I'm jealous of Nicky and all his lovers because I can't be there for him. I...I mean, we've been living this for nearly two months, and my heart can do it just fine, but my brain can't find the words to make sense of it."

"Does it have to?" I asked. "I mean, Cory, you're a smart woman, but you can't do physics to save your life. Your brain doesn't do that. Maybe what we need from you—and I know it terrifies you that anybody needs anything from you at all—maybe we just need you to think with your heart, the way you always do. Maybe it just doesn't need words. Balance isn't symmetry to the heart, Cory."

"Is that like some sort of freakin' elfish proverb?" she asked bitterly.

"Yes, as a matter of fact. But why are you thinking about this tonight? It's cold and it's wet, and before I nag you about getting inside and taking off your clothes, I'd like to know why we're here."

A noncommittal shrug, and still, those distant eyes into the grey and misty night. "Kyle and Davy I guess," she murmured after a moment. "It was like talking to a brick wall, but..."

And now it made sense. "It used to be just you and your vampire against the world, didn't it?" I asked gently.

"And the world was just as simple as Kyle thought it was," she finished softly.

We had been holding hands, but now I took her fingers to my lips and kissed. "The world was never that simple, beloved." I wasn't telling her anything she didn't know.

"No." She turned and gave me a misty smile. "But it was nice when I thought it was." Suddenly she stood up, all brusqueness. "What is simple is that we're freezing our asses off—I'm sorry—let's go inside."

"You're freezing your ass off," I corrected dryly. "And there's not enough of it as it is."

She stuck her tongue out at me and in retaliation, I blurred, moving in

hyperspeed, and swept her up in my arms, enjoying her breathless shriek as I fast-forwarded up the stairs and through the house. Her door banged behind me, and I made sure it was locked. If Green really was arriving sometime soon, I wanted these last moments private, me and her. I could share her, I could love our leader, but she was melancholy and sad and I wanted to be the one to take that away.

We made love, and she was right there with me in the present, no distant eyes, no thoughts about Adrian, no introspection, just me and our bodies and the things we felt for only each other on the surface of our skin. We fell asleep entangled, smooth limbs, tandem breathing, her wild, rusty hair tickling my nose.

In the dark of the morning, when the night things had retired and before gray broke the horizon, an electricity, a sweet scent of wild flowers, a warmth permeated the hill. I felt it and practically melted into the mattress in sheer relief, able to relax fully for the first time in nearly three weeks. I barely felt her suppressed hush as she extricated herself from my body (I feel like all elbows and knees sometimes when we are together) and slid out of bed. I heard a rustle, as she put on the T-shirt we'd filched from Green's dresser, and felt her hand on my cheek, followed by a sweet kiss, but I was truly asleep before she'd even closed the door to our room.

CORY

My Love Lies Waiting Silently For Me

I closed the door behind me and waited in the hall, listening. When I didn't hear any voices from Green's room I tried the handle—it was only locked when he was 'with' somebody. The handle gave, and I peered inside, almost afraid he wouldn't be there.

He was sitting in front of his dresser, a big light oak affair with no mirrors, probably thanks to so many years with Adrian. The sprites were brushing his hair with little tiny combs, so many of them buzzing around his head that he looked like a weary angel, halo and all. His head was tilted back and his eyes were closed and I slipped silently behind him, picking up a big wooden brush as I did so. The sprites cleared a path and I took up the task myself, resisting the urge to hold the gold satin strands to my nose and inhale, just to smell him, real

and in person, for the first time in weeks.

Green felt the difference in tension, though, and tried to turn towards me. I cupped the back of his head, saying, "Hold still, beloved. Let me tend to you."

"I've been tended to long enough," he said roughly. "Put the brush down, Corinne Carol-Anne, and let me hold you."

The brush fell out of my hands and thumped softly on the white area rug, and suddenly I was in his arms and he was warm and vital and real and *Green* and I needed his touch so much my hands were shaking with it. I ran them through his hair, mussing it, and his hands trembled their way through mine, pushing it back from my face. When my fingers found his curved and pointed ears he made a sound like a cat does, when you scratch the base of its tail then his mouth was on mine and I almost wept. Oh my beloved, I've needed you so bad...tasting you is like taking a breath after holding it for the last three weeks.

Our touch was fevered then, as we pushed under clothes and around buttons and the sense that we were trying not to hurry, that we *must not hurry* was only made worse when we were naked and bare against each other, tentative about touch and so hungry for it we almost forced our hands and thighs and arms past a barrier of wait, and when we did touch, the meeting of nerve endings was magnetic—two forces belonging to each other, kept apart for so long that their meeting was nearly violent, truly inseparable.

I needed to taste him.

I moved down his body, although his hands gripped my hair, begging me to stay up with him, and wrapped my lips around his member, taking him as deep into my mouth as I could. I moved my head and my tongue, once, twice, and then he rolled over, pulling himself from my mouth and slithering down my body like a tight ball gown being shed. I was eye level with his chest, reaching out to play with pebbled nipples the color of sun-gilt sand when his cock caught in the crease between my thigh and hip and his breath caught in his throat. I knew that sound.

He buried his head in my shoulder then, his back bowing with the position and the effort not to...but he shifted and the friction rubbed him, and he was groaning into my throat and spurting against my stomach and hip and thigh, grinding into me again and again until he was done.

Our breathing took forever to still. Mine because I was not finished with the act we had begun; his, I think because he was trying to master his embarrassment. He confirmed this guess when he said rawly, his voice sinking into its most obscure, cockney British accents, "Bleedin' Christ I haven't done that in more'n a thousand fookin' years."

I stroked his hair, holding him to my scarce breasts, trying for comfort and assurance, but in truth I was overawed by what it could mean. Green stirred, moving from me, and for once he was the one not meeting my eyes and I couldn't bear it.

"Don't..." I murmured.

"I'm getting a washcloth," he said shortly. I guess even Green has a macho pride to wound.

I sat up in bed, looking curiously at the milky and clear fluid merging on my hip, running my finger through it just to feel it glide on my skin. In a fit of whimsy I used it to write "Green loves Cory" on my stomach, using the little heart, like a kid carving names into a tree, and I grew so absorbed in the task that I didn't notice when the water stopped running in Green's bathroom until his shadow fell over me. I smiled up at him shyly, only to be devastated by the complete mortification on his face.

"Don't," I said again. "Don't..."

"I'm sorr..."

"Don't." And I found myself perilously near tears, when I'd avoided them all day. "You think this is a failure, I know you do...Green, god of sweet desire, except with the one person he loves best...you don't know what this really is..."

"What is it?" he asked simply, sitting down next to me on the bed, his hair, glorious, sunshine hair, shading his face from me like a curtain.

I ran my fingers through his seed, now growing cold and sticky on my skin. "This...this is the difference between sex and love," I said, my voice clogging in my throat. "This...is trust in love in a way I've never known. This is...this is what Bracken expects from me, but I haven't been able to give him until now, because you gave it to me first. This is every word I can't say but I feel in my heart to define how we love each other, and how it's different from how we've loved anybody else." My tears were falling freely now, and I figured I

would return trust for trust and turn my distorted face to Green, who had shaken back his hair to be able to see me clearly. "This is why I couldn't have survived another day without you, unless you had asked me to, and then I could do anything."

He moved my hand from my side, and cleaned me carefully, setting the washcloth on his end table when he was done, and seizing my hand in his own.

"When did you get to be so wise?" he asked me, his voice lighter, as he kissed my fingers.

"It was the first time you kissed me, after Adrian brought me home," I told him, sniffing a little.

"No...no..." He closed his eyes, took the finger I'd been using to write on myself and sucked it into his mouth, and my thighs clenched, reminding me that we'd started something that hadn't been finished. "That first night on the couch...when you asked me if Adrian and I were lovers, and I was so afraid that the answer I had for you would scare you out of his bed for sure."

"I don't remember," I said a little muzzily, because he had bent to my breast and started to tease my nipple with his tongue.

He lifted his head and gave me a brief kiss on the mouth. "I told you the truth. You said 'Good, because it sucks to be alone.'"

"And it sucks to be without you," I said, enjoying his shyest smile from close-up.

"And it sucks to be away from you," he murmured, then he began a long odyssey of kisses and caresses to the juncture of my thighs where he tasted me squared for what was almost ever, and when he returned and I kissed him and tasted me too, we finished what we had started.

We usually talk in bed, but he had driven for hours to get home to me, and was too exhausted for talk, and when I heard the rap on our door just barely after a chill grey showed me the canyon beyond Green's window I hurried out of bed and into his T-shirt to answer it before he woke.

It was Bracken, who smiled at me and kissed my forehead in greeting, and I leaned into him in return. "I know he needs his sleep," Bracken murmured, "so I won't be long. Nicky wants to go to school to check up on his classes and talk

to Hallow (I just bet!) but I don't know if we want him to go if we're not there." What he wasn't saying was that Renny would be no help at all, and we certainly didn't want her to be there without us.

I nodded and blinked, trying to wake up. "Call Officer Max," I said through a yawn, and then, when Bracken's eyebrows rose, "You can't go without me. It's not happening. Renny can't go without us, and Nicky, La Mark and Mario can't go alone. Max is still one of us, and he keeps his head with this shit—you saw him last week when Renny and I were knocked out. Today's his day off," I sighed, still leaning into him, enjoying his warmth in the dawn chill. "Besides," I murmured, "It wouldn't hurt Renny to be reminded that he's still one of us, and that we can have a little patience with the man before we cut him off completely."

Bracken made a strangled laugh and bent to kiss me. "I told you that you're a very smart woman—I forgot to mention devious."

"It's a perk," I said grandly through another yawn.

In reply, Bracken seized my shoulders and turned me around, giving me a little shove back into Green's bedroom, where I crawled in bed next to my other beloved and slept soundly for another four hours.

Green crawled out of bed at one point, and returned with cold hands and a cold nose, towel-dried hair and feet that were slightly damp because he had washed them after walking his land barefoot in the cold. Bracken did the same thing at least three times a week, so I was prepared for him. I rolled over, taking his chilled hands between my breasts and letting him bury his face in my neck. Of course this turned into lovemaking again, and by the time we were truly ready to get out of bed and shower and eat it was almost noon.

There was corn chowder simmering on the stove and sandwiches in the refrigerator, and I made Green sit on the couch while I got us a tray. Most of the elves and weres are outdoors sorts—even in the rain—so the living room was empty of everybody except Renny, who was snoozing in front of the large bay window. (Enough of the fey had been born of or inside of trees that as soon as other means of heat had become available, Green had bricked over all of the fireplaces and converted to natural gas.) We ate in a companionable silence for a while before I swallowed the last of my sandwich and cleared our dishes, then went to lean against my beloved simply because I could, and grill him for information, because neither of us was in a position to simply doze on the couch.

"So where's Twilight?" I asked—I was very curious to see our newly healed brother, after all.

"Either sleeping with Willow or Leah in their room," Green replied, a smile in his voice. "As soon as he was healed, all of his reservations about touching and being touched sort of went out the window."

"Lucky him," I said dryly. "So—did you all enjoy yourselves when the care package got there?" My voice was both coy and understanding, and Green's chuckle let me know he understood.

"Very much so," he said softly, "But nothing could compare to coming home to you."

"Ooooh...good answer."

"Truth." He nuzzled my hair, and I tried to keep my resolve to take care of some business before we just sat and cuddled. Before I could ask any more questions, though, he said gently, "You're tired and still too thin...I thought you were running to gain weight."

"I've gained stamina," I said optimistically. "I can run a mile without blowing like a busted air vent. That's got to be good."

"It is," he murmured. "I'm just...Goddess, beloved—in a million years I never thought we'd ask so much of you."

"Hey..." I took his hand, which was resting on my chest, and kissed it. "You know...nobody ever really expected too much of me before you. I mean...I'm important here...for whatever reason. I'm important to good people. I'll do what I can not to let them down."

"Impossible for you to let us down," he said, and I turned to look at him. His eyes were half closed, his arms were clutching me convulsively and I heard Bracken's voice in my head. *You of all people should know that the only person in this hill who will never have to bow to you is Green.*

Green didn't need a queen right now. He needed a lover, and, at the moment, a nap mate. I yawned and snuggled in deeper into his arms. "Right back at you, beloved," I murmured. I'd given us the day off to celebrate Green's homecoming. A couch nap at two in the afternoon was a celebration indeed.

Bracken apparently had the same idea, because about the time I was stretching on the couch and trying to sneak out from under Green's protective arm (I had to potty), he came wandering out of our room, blinking hard to make himself wake up. I slithered the rest of the way across the couch and met him in the entryway.

"How is he?" he asked quietly, ruffling my hair.

"Really tired—but he seems to be in a good mood." I was shifting from foot to foot, and Brack laughed at me.

"Go," he said. "I'm just going to get a snack."

When I got back, Bracken was sitting one end of the couch, eating soup and crackers and talking with a full mouth, and Green was listening with his complete attention.

"He called your blood..." Green said in response.

"Yeah." Bracken nodded and swallowed. "But it wasn't very strong...I don't think he expected me to be a full blooded sidhe/red-cap."

"He called your blood?" I asked, surprised. Bracken hadn't told me this after our last encounter with Hollow Man.

Bracken shifted in his seat and looked uncomfortable. "Well, yeah—it's why I used my call against him."

"You didn't tell me?" My voice rose, and so did Green's eyebrows and I tried to get a handle on my emotions.

"You were busy!" He understated. "And afterwards you were yakking up a lung...honestly, Cory, it's not that big of a deal..."

"The hell it isn't," I spat, and a part of my brain realized that it was too late — after cruising on the lovely plateau of a relative peace with Bracken and then seeing Green again, my emotional rail car had performed a stomach drop off a steep mountain and was now careening downhill, sans brakes. Every detail of that day came staggering back to me—the way he had protected me and fretted over me and carried me back and forth across the whole damned campus... dammit— couldn't he have told me he was in mortal danger too?

"It means you're vulnerable to him in ways that I'm not!" I replied,

knowing it was not the whole of my heart and I may never get the whole of my heart out, and it left me struggling for words. "It...it means that...that...dragging you to school everyday when you hate it so much could get you killed...and you carried me around campus when you were hurt...and that all your song and dance about me telling you stuff is just bullshit and you don't trust me enough to tell me that your stupid worthless precious fucking important life is in danger you fuckheaded asshole."

The men I loved more than life itself were both looking at me with big eyes and open mouths. Green recovered first.

"Bracken, I'm going to excuse myself from this, as entertaining as I think it might be. Cory, when it's over, uhm I'll be in my room—Twilight is coming in around three to talk—you may want to be there."

He stood up while Bracken and I glared at each other, kissed the top of my head tenderly and cupped my cheek. I looked at him with unhappy eyes and said, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to..."

"I know you didn't," he murmured. "I think you've had a crash coming for a long time, beloved. I'm just glad Bracken's the one who got in your way and not me."

"You're on the list," I murmured darkly.

He nodded. "I know it. You've been very rational about it all, but it can't change the fact that I left you when you needed me...just don't be afraid to call me a fuckheaded bastard when you feel it, okay beloved?"

I nodded, he kissed me again, this time on the mouth, and it almost but not quite melted my anger. Then he was gone and I was staring at Bracken with unutterable hurt in my eyes.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Honestly, it didn't seem that important."

"I'll quit school. I'll beg Green—he won't say no to me...not if it's your life on the line...we can just stay here for a while and..."

Bracken stood up, and now he was well and truly pissed. "And hide? Don't do me any fucking favors, Cory...I've never run away from a fight...and don't

ask Green for anything for me that you wouldn't ask for yourself, do you got that?"

"Well then don't hide things from me...my God, Bracken—all that shit you had to say about me keeping things to myself, don't you think I'd like to know that not only can this asshole hypnotize you with his blood but call *your* blood to him? I mean, if we know what he can do, we can stop him or protect you...Goddess, you don't know what he can do...you...you zoned out... you didn't see...Ellen Beth wearing Chris' blood like a second skin..."

"Which is one reason I didn't tell you!" His voice crescendoed to a pitch that had Renny merrowring and jumping up from her spot by the window.

"Which is the biggest reason you should have told me!" I countered, and my voice rose to a shriek as well.

"Why, so you can throw yourself in front of me like you couldn't do for Adrian?" he shouted, and his porcelain face was mottled with the flush of blood at the surface.

"So I can *protect* you!" I hollered back, and I wouldn't, *couldn't* let the reference to Adrian rattle me. Goddess, Bracken was still so angry at him—and his next words confirmed that this fight had almost more to do with that anger than it had to do with me.

"The fuck you will!" He strode up to me and grabbed me by the shoulders, all the better to glare at me from his hellish height and try to intimidate me with his (truly) glowing eyes. "I told you before, Corinne Carol-Anne, that the one person in this entire hill who will never have to bow to you is Green, and that means that he's the only person on the hill who doesn't have the privilege and the goddamned fucking joy of throwing himself in traffic to protect you. Now I'll give you as good as I get when it comes to sharing my heart, beloved, but the sooner you understand that your life comes before mine on or off the hill, the better off we'll both be." And with that he hauled me up against him and crushed my mouth to his brutally, so brutally, that I tasted a little blood from my lips, and then he thrust his tongue inside, tasting me and tasting me and tasting me, before he let go of my arms and strode from the room, leaving me limp and sinking to the carpet before he could even slam the door to the porch.

Blurring impossibly from his room, Green caught me before I hit the ground.

GREEN

The Sweet and the Bitter

"Goddess," Green murmured into her hair as she tried to control her little hiccups of hurt, "I haven't heard a row that gorgeous since Bracken and Adrian were a couple."

"I didn't know they were ever an actual couple," she murmured, surprised. She was leaning her head against his chest in that way she had that always pleased him. Everything else about her might be prickly and independent, but that head against his chest had always betrayed a sweet and absolute trust. "I just sort of thought they...I don't know...made love because they were so close it was inevitable, you know?"

"Oh they did," he agreed, thinking sadly on how much she did not know, and how much of Bracken she needed to know before she understood him. Green himself was as open about his love as he had ever been—but it was hard, so hard, to suffer so many losses to an open heart. Bracken's heart had always been grimmer, angrier, more apt to argue with boundaries than Green's. Bracken, Green had always thought with admiration, would have killed Oberon before allowing himself to be enslaved for more than a hundred years as Green had.

Of course, Adrian had said once, when he and Bracken were *almost* exclusive to each other, "But if you were just like Bracken, beloved, I wouldn't need you like I need blood in my veins, now would I?" And now, as he kissed Cory lightly on the lips, healing the small cut Bracken had inflicted, he knew the truth of this—Bracken would call to her blood, because that was his very nature. Green would heal her heart, because that was his.

"They did become lovers because of that," Green said, snapping out of his reverie. Goddess, 1800 years of living and he had never been as immersed in the past as Adrian's death had made him! "But for a decade, almost, they were exclusive..."

"With a notable exception," Cory said dryly, touching the lips that had just healed hers.

He grinned. "Did you ever doubt it?"

She looked at him soberly, from her position against his chest, as though

seeing something inside her beloved she had not thought of before. "Not once," she murmured. "So they fought?"

Green set her down on his bed and lay next to her—just to talk, to touch and to hold. It was what they had been doing on the couch—reconnecting. "Ferociously—especially towards the end...I swear, they broke more furniture in those two months than has been broken in the hill before or since."

"Why did they break up?"

Green smiled a little, a sad smile. "I think that would be obvious, luv. They broke up because neither one of them was you."

"I wasn't even born yet!" she protested, flushing, but he was very serious.

"They had been waiting for a woman like you since Bracken came of age, Corinne Carol-Anne. I'm not exaggerating. They made love to each other because that is what our people do. They fell *in* love with *you*, because that is who you are to them. Never forget that."

A small smile quirked at her lips. "Thank you, beloved...I wouldn't dream of it... what I don't understand is why they fought... I mean..." She wrinkled her forehead and stroked his hair back from his brow, taking a long, purring moment to stroke the curve of his pointed ear. "If they were ready to stop being a couple...they weren't bound by anything, Green—not even convention. All that bound them was habit..."

A memory flashed in front of Green's eyes, a deadly sun two hours over horizon, the old panel truck safely in the dark of the old shed, and Bracken—much shorter, heartbreakingly young, and so devastated by his own mistake that Green could hardly have punished him more. "That..." he sighed, lay his head against her breast, just to hear her heart beat, then shifted them so that she was laying on him. "That," he resumed, "was my fault, I think. Yes—I'm pretty sure the reason they had to fight for freedom instead of simply ceasing to be together dates back to a very, very young Bracken, and a damn fool quest for some peaches."

He told her the story then, some of it he'd gathered from Bracken's frantic mother and father as they'd realized their son was gone from the hill with his favorite playmate, and some he'd gotten from an unrepentant Adrian the next evening. It had been one of the few times that Green and Adrian had ever fought.

"His happiness is not more important than you're life! Goddess BLIGHT it, you fuckhead—you could have died!" Adrian had touched Green's hand then, woven slender fingers in with Green's elongated ones, and frowned prettily, autumn-sky eyes bright, and as was often the case with Adrian, unexpectedly compassionate.

"His happiness is just like yours, Green," he said calmly. "It's the only reason to walk the planet at all."

"Goddess," Cory murmured through a clogged throat and bright eyes. "That's so like him...hell—it's so like both of them." She flashed a sudden, unclouded grin at him. "Bracken had rings made, you know—for the four of us. Bless him, he can be such a cranky asshole sometimes, but so good with the grand romantic gesture, you know?"

"Like peaches for his mother," Green nodded.

"Like peaches for his mother," she agreed. "So you made him promise to never leave Adrian behind—and he was ready to be non-exclusive, and Adrian wasn't, and...Bracken being Bracken had to fight with something if he wasn't going to get his way."

"I have no idea how they resolved the issue," Green said thoughtfully. "One day they were either beating the hell out of each other or inseparable. The next day, they were competing with each other for girls when they weren't shagging each other silly. Mostly competing for girls though."

"They didn't compete for me!" she protested, laughing. "I think Adrian took Bracken by the station to scope me out one night, and he looked at me through a window, and his expression got...well..." Her voice fell. "I didn't know it at the time, but it was his hurt look—when he gets all stoic and stone-faced, but he's bleeding inside..." She trailed off. "Jesus, I'm an idiot...I never put it together before..."

"At first sight, beloved. Just like Adrian. But Bracken would never reach for what his brother loved."

"And unlike you and Adrian..."

"The two of them never did share well."

She put her hand over her eyes. "So he just backed away...Goddess, he

must be so pissed at Adrian. He just hands me over to his brother without a qualm, and then Adrian goes and dies...all that effort not to leave him behind..."

"And Adrian leaves him instead," Green finished. "Yes—you and I were mad at Adrian, but Bracken...oh, Goddess, his fury must be tearing him apart."

"Well it's not doing any of us much good, is it?" she snapped, and Green nodded.

"A thing you must tell him the next time you can talk civilly. And in the mean time..." His hand had been stroking her upper arm, and now it shifted, and he stroked her little breast through her sweatshirt, feeling the nipple pop deliciously under his fingers. She arched, gasped, and he kissed her lightly on the lips. "In the meantime, we've got another half an hour, and Bracken's loss is my gain," he murmured, and she took his face in her hands and kissed him back.

They were just getting dressed again, with a lot of touching and giggling, when there was a tentative knock on the door.

"Just a minute, brother," Green called, buttoning his fly and tugging his sweatshirt down. Cory straightened her T-shirt and ran a hand through her disastrous hair and Green turned and laughed at her.

"Well there's not a flipping mirror in here!" she protested, and he just laughed more, moving towards his dresser to pick up the abandoned brush.

"Come in, Twilight," Green called again, then he pushed Cory to the chair and sat her down, starting the brush through her hair even as Twilight entered.

"It's getting long," she was saying, as the door opened. "I need to cut it."

"Please don't," he murmured, and she flushed, then she looked up at the doorway and gasped.

"Goddess," she breathed. "Green..." Then she remembered herself. "I'm sorry, Twilight—it's just...Green didn't warn me—you're so beautiful."

And he was. His skin was a deep and dusky purple, and his hair, silver and gold spangled, twilit-violet. His features were classical sidhe, with the wide-set eyes and triangular face, but his eyes, which looked darkest brown, were sheened silver, and his mouth was, like Green's, sensual, full, but unlike Green's it had a serious turn, without the ever-present hint of laughter. He was the least

human side Cory had ever seen, and she was obviously delighted.

"Stop drooling, beloved," Green murmured, enjoying her reaction very much.

"No, no, Green man—you let her drool. Pretty human girls haven't drooled over me in a very long time."

There was a time when she would have protested being either pretty or human, but as it was she simply grinned up at him, and then winced as Green pulled her hair back into its habitual pony-tail. He put a hand on her shoulder then, telling her he was done, and she stood up and gave him a peck on the cheek. "Just for you I won't cut it," she said sweetly, then hopped on the just-made bed and crossed her legs under her. "Sit down!" she urged, pointing to the chair she'd just left. Green sat beside her on the bed, and Twilight did just as she asked, but instead of straddling the chair, as Bracken or Arturo would have, he sat squarely in it and bowed his head slightly.

"Thank you for the invitation," he said formally.

"It's our pleasure," Green told him gently. "I wanted Cory to be here, because she's been on the front lines with this thing, and I thought she should hear some of your story."

"There's not much to tell. You know that, Green—I know very little about what it was that attacked me and...and stripped me down to what you saw."

"Well, what is it you do know?" Cory asked, leaning forward. Her eyes were avid and kind at the same time. "We know that the sight of him makes the elves dizzy, the stench of him makes the vampires sick, and the sound of him makes the were-creatures scream in pain...but humans hardly notice he's there—it seems like he must be one of the Goddess' get, but he makes all of us sick, so I don't see how he could be."

Twilight nodded. "When I first knew him, he was human or—much like you, little Goddess—he looked and behaved so much like a human that nobody ever thought to look beyond."

"You knew him?" she asked delicately, hazel eyes shrewd.

"I loved him," Twilight said simply. "I've always had a fondness for humans. This one..." He grimaced, his handsome, lovely face looking for a

moment like the wretched, starved creature Green had found huddling outside of the hotel. "I can not remember his name—I'm sorry. I think...I think he stripped it from me, when he stripped me of power and...and I think after that, it was never really his again."

Cory leaned forward and took Twilight's hand in her own. "Don't worry about it, brother. You're whole and well—everything else is icing, right?"

He met Green's eyes. "She really is yours, isn't she?"

"She's every inch her own," Green replied, but he touched her back, under her shirt, where she'd marked herself just for him.

"So..." Cory said, losing a fight against a blush, "We don't know his name...and it wouldn't matter anyway...but how did he go from being your lover to being our enemy?"

"He had power," Twilight said bluntly. "Not a lot—not nearly what you can channel, little Goddess, but he had a modest amount of his own. It wasn't awakened until we came together—and then, it was small things. Doors slamming all over the house when we fought, windows or vases cracking when we were making love, petty things really."

"Destructive things," Cory said meditatively. "He did destructive things unconsciously..." She frowned, concerned. "Was he destructive in other ways?"

Twilight nodded. "Self-destructive. When we met, he was often drunk, and angry when he was drunk, but when that faded over time I thought it was only the anger from abuse that caused it...most beings, when treated fairly and well, will respond by treating others fairly and well."

Cory nodded. "It seems to work here..." She turned her head and looked at Green. "So far," she said thoughtfully, "he sounds like one of Adrian's saved...hell, he actually sounds like me."

"Except for the destructive part, beloved," Green reminded her. "In fact, although you tried very hard to look the part, mindless destruction is as far from who you are as this Hollow Man is."

"Yes, but I was angry," she murmured. Then, to Twilight, "So, he was human, with some power...then what happened?"

Twilight frowned—a supremely unhappy look that said he did not like speaking ill of an old lover. Cory looked on in sympathy and waited quietly for him to speak. "He was more than...angry. He was resentful...the longer our association, the more resentful he became of the things that I had and he did not. He wanted the physical beauty...he wanted the power. But...you must understand. He was raised by his mother, and she died when he was just a boy. So much of his wanting...his endless needing...came from this feeling that he had been denied things—love, acceptance, power in his life—and that death was what had denied him these things. So he craved love and attention—he was an endless well for them. I could pour these things into him measured by gallons of tears, and still he would be empty. But the thing he most resented me having that he did not, was my immortality."

Cory looked surprised, and Green laughed quietly to himself. She was convinced that she would grow old and wither and die, and she had made her peace with it, even before age reared its head. But Green knew better. He'd known since he'd first seen her that she was destined for greater things than a humble death, defeated by time.

"He wanted to live forever?"

"Like all the things he thought he was owed...he craved it. But I did not know how much." There was a heartbreaking sigh, and the violet-skinned sidhe shook his head, his hair in all its glory rippling down his back like a river of night.

"I am usually very...loyal, to my human lovers. Their lives are so short...begging your pardon, Lady Cory."

"No worries," she said dryly.

"I don't mind age..." Twilight continued. "In fact it fascinates me. I tend to love my companions..."

"Til dust and beyond," Cory murmured softly. "We understand, Twilight. It's okay."

Twilight nodded, swallowing hard. "But...but this one...I couldn't. He needed, and the more I gave the more he needed...it got so that when I looked at him, all I saw was a starry vortex of want. His personality, the nobility I had seen in him at the beginning...it all seemed to disappear—even his humanity was

fading. I tried to break it off... and he grew angry beyond reason. He seemed to feel I was, once again, trying to deprive him of what was rightfully his...as though if I stayed with him, he would become immortal. He stormed away, leaving cracks in the walls of my home." He paused for a moment, in thought. "I lived alone, on a small hill of my own...I remember I was repairing my house when he returned the next morning. He'd been to see the vampires..."

He paused for a moment, and then, as though shouldering a huge burden he sighed and continued. "Your vampires are..." he smiled, "I've met Ellis...he is young and impetuous and still...good. Your vampires are healthy. They are kind. The vampires in Texas...Texas is a hard land...it is vast and frightening, and all of the reasons vampires become vampires in the first place, Texas threatens. They would not care if they were ruining a life, or creating a serial killer or...making a monster. He was fey—he had enough fey in him to evidence power. What he became when the vampires turned him was...monstrous. I couldn't see him anymore...that figurative whirlpool I had seen was now real. I had a couple of were-creatures living on a cottage on my hill—as soon as he greeted me, they turned, and started to howl, mrowl, and scream with pain. And where before he had just been needy, now he was mad. He was ranting about how I had turned everyone against him—even the vampires detested him, and how he was a monster because he had turned, but here he was, awake in the day. I was afraid—I was terrified, but... but I had brought him into our world, the world of the Goddess, and I tried to calm him down."

"Oh no," Cory murmured.

"Oh yes, little Goddess." Twilight nodded his head very seriously. "I went to embrace him, and he seized me instead. Like the vampires he has the Goddess' strength. He bore me to the ground and sank his teeth into my neck and fed and fed and fed...and if he had just taken blood I could have lain there, broken, and recovered eventually. But he was fey: he took blood, and took power, and my hill dried up around my body as he took and took and took. It was as though all of that need had been unleashed upon the world, only worse...much much a thousand times worse."

There was silence, and Green watched Cory's mind working on what she'd just been told. "What about the weres?" she asked after a moment. "On your hill...did he..."

"He infected them," Twilight said flatly. "When I came to consciousness

eventually, their cottage was the first place I went for help, but he'd bitten them—fed from them—and...you know the nature of the were-creature...they often become two-natured because there is something the human world will not give them. They become the thing they love because of need. This monster...he is literally a Hollow Man—need is the thing that drives him, a craving for things he can never have because you have to be able to give something of yourself in order to get them...His need is addictive. The were-creatures on my hill were decimated—they lived, but they had been fed from..."

Twilight clenched his eyes in pain. "I spent many years on the streets, when I finally wandered broken from my home, all true memory of what I had been broken and drained...I often slept in drug houses, where people clenched their veins with pain and shook and groaned and pissed themselves with the effects of drugs and with withdrawals and all of the human pain houses like that hold. My were-cottage..." And for the first time in his recitation, tears actually started rolling across the lovely purple cheeks. "It had been a happy place...my were-creatures were gentle people, often abused in their human lives...their cottage was beautiful, and full of sunshine and gentle love making and kind and easy humanity...I have no idea how long I lay there, senseless and bleeding, when Hollow Man was done with me, but when I had crawled to the were-cottage, it had become...like the drug houses, only worse. He had spread his need to them, through his bite...spread it and intensified it and made it awful and addictive and toxic...when I got there, one of them had already exploded with need, his blood putrefied beyond recognition. The others were screaming in pain...Goddess help me, there was nothing I could do but lay on the floor, keening, as their bodies lost composition around me..." And now Twilight well and truly lost his composure, burying his face in his hands, his shoulders shaking with sobs.

Cory made a low grunt in her throat, and her hand clenched around Green's, and he looked at her in concern as her face tightened, her cheekbones seeming ready to slice out of her skin. Moving so quickly he swore she was moving with Goddess speed, she wrapped her arms around their lost brother's shoulders and rocked him against her. "I'm sorry, Twilight," she murmured, her throat rough. "We've lived through that here...please...don't live it again, not for us..." But the wound was too deep, and Green moved from the bed and began rubbing Twilight's shoulders, his touch strong, and increasingly sensual until his eyes met Cory's over the shaking body, and she swallowed and nodded.

Leaning over and giving Green a kiss on the cheek she said, "Let me know

when you're free, beloved...Grace is having a formal dinner downstairs at seven."

Green nodded, and a weary smile quirked at his mouth. "You may want to go make up with Bracken, luv...I can't promise I'll be free tonight."

She swallowed again, and gave the brightest smile she could manage. "Groovy...make-up sex and coming home sex in the same day...this job has its perks." She made him laugh before she bobbed shakily out the door, leaving him to the work he did best.

CORY

Conversations and Bouncing Balls

There was a strange were-creature waiting outside Green's room as I emerged. I was starting to be able to spot them—there is a supernatural grace about a were-animal, and, true to my vampire sympathies, I could almost smell the animal they spent their alternate lives as.

"Hello..." I murmured, startled. Then, as I remembered conversations with Green: "You must be Eric."

"And you must be Cory," he said, looking just as startled.

"Uhm...Green's going to be busy for a bit...Twilight's in there...he...it was hard," I said awkwardly, and could have kicked myself for the double entendre.

A wicked smile crossed his pleasantly freckled features, and suddenly I didn't feel so awkward. "If it wasn't, I'm sure it is now," he said with raised eyebrows, and I laughed.

"Have you eaten yet? I know you all got in late, but Grace left food."

Eric grinned again, only this time it was all excited little boy. "I was actually hoping for sweets—cookies, pie..."

"Probably both," I agreed, and suddenly that sounded much more attractive than going out to find Bracken who was probably brooding through the gardens on the hill. "Let's go see!"

We found, in fact, several cream pies—chocolate, coconut, and, Green's favorite, banana. Eric and I both eyeballed the chocolate. I cut a large slice for each of us and we sat down across the table from each other and started chatting like old friends. Eric was full of stories of Adrian and Bracken and even Green from twenty years ago.

"So, does Bracken still wear his mullet when he glamours up for the humans?" He wanted to know through a mouthful of chocolate pie.

I felt the smile that I had worn through his description of Adrian and Bracken competing over a prom queen using concert tickets and tricked out Mustangs, fade. "He...well, first I..." I sighed. "He wears his hair short now," I said after a moment. "He cut it because...because he's freakin' Bracken and he's mortal and it's some sort of symbol and now I can't get him to grow it out again."

Eric looked at me kindly. "Goddess bless you for just taking him on," he said after a moment. Then he added a little shyly, "You know, of course, half the hill heard you two this morning."

I flushed. "Half the hill hears most of our arguments," I said, shaking my head. Then I grinned a little. "Adrian told me that this place was like high school—without all the petty popularity crap. Adrian's right about most things."

Eric looked at me strangely. "You say that like..."

I swallowed again. It had been such a pleasant conversation. "He wanders the gardens a lot," I said, purposely not using the 'g' word. "I don't know how often—he sort of threatened me by saying that if I started going out there too much he'd stop showing up. But...but when Green or I start missing him too terribly... he's there."

Eric nodded sagely, as though I hadn't just told him there was a ghost in our consecrated grove, and asked the obvious question. "What about Brack?"

I looked away. "He won't see him," I said, looking mournfully at my pie, which suddenly didn't seem as tasty as it had. "He...he looks around him or through him or over him and...he's still so pissed off, Eric. Green sent us all to...to this preternatural counselor..."

"Hallow? He's a good man. Green had me go talk to him when I was thinking about leaving the hill."

"Yeah...and Bracken will go off on just about any subject—bitches about me and about Green and all the stuff he sort of opens up about anyway...but not about Adrian." Suddenly this stranger was reaching for my hand across the table.

"You're perfect for them you know," he said after a moment. "I partly came to meet you...to make sure you would be...I don't know...worth these people—I love them, all three of them, even Adrian although the son of a bitch went and died on us. For you, Bracken will get over being pissed off."

I looked up at him and smiled, suddenly feeling hungry again. "I'll just piss him off all on my own," I said, stuffing my mouth with a forkful of heaven. We laughed for a minute and suddenly the conversation went back to being casual, between two new acquaintances again. Renny padded up to the table, eyed the chocolate pie and licked her whiskers, so I cut her a large piece (Grace cooked for beings that had high metabolisms—there were, like, ten of each kind of pie in the massive refrigerator) and put it on the table. She leapt into the chair next to me and started lapping contentedly at the whipped cream, a happy rumbling starting from her chest, making the moment even more companionable and peaceful. It would have stayed that way except Chloe stalked in, looking less than pleased to see me.

"Where's my mother?" she asked without preamble. "I need to talk to her."

Eric and I met disbelieving eyes, and Renny's purr turned into a growl. "You're mom is dead, Chloe," I said shortly. "She doesn't get her soul back until sunset—you've got like, two hours."

Chloe shook her head in annoyance. "I don't want her to come out and play or anything—I just need to talk to her—and having that animal at the table is so beyond disgusting."

I felt my own growl starting in my chest. "Did you hear that, Renny?" I asked, "She thinks you're disgusting." And with that, Renny morphed into a tiny woman with unfriendly brown eyes and whipped cream on her cheeks.

Chloe was aghast, but, sadly enough, not speechless. "Oh my God—she's naked!"

"Picky bitch, aren't you?" Renny growled, and then turned back into a cat, lapping at the chocolate with fierce satisfaction.

"Your mother's not asleep, Chloe," I said into the shocked silence. "Just

like Renny's not really a house cat. Your mother's dead. She doesn't breathe, she doesn't dream, she doesn't twitch. Her soul is with the Goddess right now, because God denied the vampires daylight, and if you want a more in depth history lesson you'll have to ask Green, because that story is just too painful."

Chloe looked at me, her mouth opening and closing, and I scraped my plate of the last of the pie and stood up.

"Are the boys outside?" I asked.

"Stay away from them," she snapped automatically.

"You want me to stay away from them, stop bringing them to my home," I replied evenly. "Your mother's room is way way down the hall—the hall takes a left, a right, a right and a left into the hill, so that sunshine doesn't even accidentally get into the darkling—and your mom's is the first door to the left—it's got a quilt on the front, you'll recognize it. If you get lost and wander into the room with the yellow door right across from it, I'll rip your hands off. Any one in the hill will tell you I mean that."

Chloe simply stood, all five feet, ten inches of her, and glowered at me. I returned her glare and then called cheerfully, "Hey, Eric—want to meet Grace's grandchildren? I bet they've never seen a were-coyote turn before."

Eric stood up smoothly and followed me out, Renny padding at our heels. As soon as the door was shut behind us and we were headed down the stairs towards the two childish voices raised out on the lawn, he let out a low whistle. "Wow. That was some serious hostility."

I sighed. "Yeah. We try to be nice to her because, I mean, she's Grace's daughter...but we can't always hide how much she pisses us off."

Eric grinned. "I meant *her*, Cory. She's definitely got it in for you."

Now I grimaced. "She's jealous," I said after a moment. "She's probably jealous of the whole hill—everybody her mom has mothered since she left her family. I'm just...I don't know. Of age. Grace and I are pretty close, and I'm young and Chloe just sees me and...wishes she was me, I guess."

The boys were playing tag on the front lawn, the one that you saw as you drove in, and I waved at them now. They grinned and swarmed up to me, wanting hugs and my complete attention for a few moments. I introduced them

to Eric and Renny, who both obligingly changed, but only once. I'd kind of forgotten about the little kids seeing naked adults part, so to get over that awkwardness, (and Gavin and Graeme's terrible excitement about the naked people) I asked them if they wanted to help me with my superpowers. I had something I wanted to try.

Both times we had confronted the Hollow Man I had needed to shield—not just from him, but from his blood and from the vapor his blood produced when it was destroyed. I wanted to try a power shield that was...well, complete. Complete and mobile. A bubble of safety, so to speak. I had both boys stand, separately, on the lawn, concentrated a little and called my power.

It was scrumptiously easy. I worked on emotional fuel, and at the moment I was up to my eyeballs in love, sex and anger. The two bubbles of magic that appeared around the boys glowed iridescently and their mouths made little 'ohs' of excitement. Graeme, the more adventurous one, noticed that his feet were now about three inches off the ground, and he gave an experimental bounce. His bubble bounced with him, about a foot into the air, and the acrobatics began.

The kids began to bounce against the walls of the bubbles, and the bubbles of magic began to fly. At first, I controlled their flight path in an effort to keep them from bouncing into Green's precious flower beds, but once they realized that I was directing their bouncing, they begged me to help them fly, and so I did. Using my power and my whimsy I bounced them in the air, I juggled them, I whirled them gently together and then against each other. The littles heard their laughter, and suddenly we were knee deep in a giggling hoard of sprites, nixies, brownies and such, who used their combined mass of rainbow hands to bop the power balloons in the air like beach balls, and Eric and I just sat and watched the boys giggle themselves breathless, tumbling about on a cushion of air. They were in the middle of a series of complicated aerobatics when Chloe came out, looking pale and angry, and made a little shriek of alarm.

"Stop that!" she commanded. "Stop that before you drop them!"

The littles all gave a unanimous whimper and dissolved into the landscape as fast as their little legs and little powers could carry them, and I concentrated on making sure the power bubbles bounced off the whisper-soft lawn without jostling the boys too much, now that they weren't there as a cushion. I spared Chloe a glance and then turned my eyes back to the boys and continued. "Chloe, if anything strong enough to break through Green's power flies through this hill

to break my concentration, we will all have a lot more to worry about than a six foot drop onto grass as soft as a feather mattress.”

"How can you be so sure?" She demanded. "You're like sixteen—what gives you the right to say my children are safe in your psycho world.”

"Hard experience,” I said softly. "You do not want to know the things I've done with my power when I've been weak. I'm not weak now.”

Eric made a noise next to me, and murmured, "Over there, in the Goddess grove.”

I nodded. "Yeah. I see him." Bracken had been watching me since I'd come out and started to play with the children. I could feel his regard, his perplexed and unhappy concentration, and although I wasn't quite ready to talk to him, he was starting to break down my anger and reserve.

"Did you find your mother, Chloe?" I asked, avoiding the topic.

"Yes,” she said shortly. "And you don't need to be so smug about being right.”

I grunted, and even though I could probably throw the boys around in their shields for hours, I suddenly felt very tired. "If you have to work tonight, that means the boys will be staying here, right?”

Chloe made an unhappy noise—yes, but she didn't like it. Too damn bad.

"Hey guys!" I called, setting the bubbles on the ground delicately. Graeme and Gavin took a couple of wobbly steps on solid ground and then fell on the grass, giggling. I called again, and they made their unsteady way towards me, falling into my arms and laughing for all they were worth. I hugged them and agreed with everything they said—yes—I *saw you do that flip, that was amazing. No, I wouldn't have let you fall—you know that Yes—if I'm not tired we can do this again.*—and then, when I had their complete attention I told them, "Hey, guys—we're going to have a full banquet tonight—down in the big hall. You want to join us?”

"Yeah!”

"Oh wow! A full banquet? Like in Robin Hood movies and everything?”

I nodded. "Exactly like that.”

"Can we sit with you, Cory?" Graeme wanted to know, and I had to shake my head.

"No," I said regretfully. "I wish you could...but you know those Robin Hood movies?" They nodded. "I'm sort of up at the head of the table—we've got important stuff to talk about tonight and they kind of need me and your grandmother. But Renny here will sit with you, right Renny?" Renny looked at me in surprise from her golden cat's eyes, and then nodded. "And you'll get to meet Nicky, and Mario and La Mark—they can shape shift into birds." I dropped my voice conspiratorially. "And they can shape-shift with their clothes on!"

"Cool..." Gavin said, wide eyed. He had been the most shocked when Renny appeared naked in front of him.

"Anyway, I'm going to have Renny and Eric take you guys inside to get dressed. We all get dressed up a little, and you," I swiped a hand over Graeme's grimy hands and ruffled Gavin's tousled hair, "Are not dressed up yet. Don't worry—all we need is clean jeans and t-shirts, and a little less garden, okay?"

They boys' faces fell. "We don't have any extra clothes," Gavin said disconsolately.

"I'm sure we can scrounge you up something. Renny—the lower fey quarters should have something for them." Nymphs, dryads, smaller trolls—there were myriad creatures that didn't grow much bigger than two small boys. "But you're going to have to change before you go there." Although it hadn't happened yet, there was a deep seated fear among the lower fey that the were-creatures would forget who they were in animal form and accidentally eat a brownie, nixie or sprite because he thought it was a bird. Like I said, it hadn't happened yet, but when you were smaller than five inches tall, you had the right to be a little paranoid. Renny nodded obediently and looked expectantly towards the boys.

"You can watch television in the living room while she gets changed," I said. "You remember where the DVD's are?" They nodded and followed Renny in, and then I turned to Chloe.

"Were there two big dogs with your mom?" I asked. Steph and Joe were the young couple that Grace was feeding from presently. As dogs, Stephanie was like a big, calico Newfoundland and Joe was a golden retriever. As humans, Steph was a tall, round woman and Joe was a thin, awkward man—they neither

matched, complemented nor contrasted each other physically, but they could finish each other's sentences and you could scent their complete belonging together across the hill.

Were-creatures who were doubling as dinner frequently slept with their vampires—partially to guard them, partially because it was a quiet place, and partially to keep the vampire from waking up too hungry, because a hungry vampire wasn't just a bad thing, it was a force of nature. Grace was fond of saying that Steph and Joe were her two favorite flavors, and they enjoyed the compliment.

"Yes," Chloe confirmed, surprised that I would know this.

"Good," I said. "They'll probably want to sit with the boys too—it will be a good table, and the boys will have fun."

Eric looked at me and darted his eyes towards Bracken. "Are you going to take care of that?" he asked delicately, and I scrubbed my face with my hand.

"Well yeah!" I answered back in frustration. "I just...I just wish he'd forgive him, that's all. That would make it just a little bit easier on all of us, you know?"

Eric nodded somberly. "I know." Then he gave me an unexpected hug. "You are so good here," he said through a tight throat. He took a step back and smiled, and turned towards Chloe.

"You know, I was here when your mother first got here," he said conversationally.

"What were you, like two?" Chloe asked, ungraciously.

"More like sixteen. Your mom used to sit out at night, until almost dawn. I was...well, pretty fucked up at the time. I'd come out here and sit at her feet, and then I'd start to worry that she wouldn't go in on time. That's when Adrian would come out and feed from me, and offer me to Grace, and then we'd all go inside together. Sometimes, Adrian couldn't make it, for one reason or another, and then it would be just me and your mom. And eventually, she'd start calling me inside all on her own. She hurt so bad back then—it was like, she needed a fucked up teenager to mother, or she wouldn't have survived. I bet you're bringing all that back to her all over again—how easy are you making it on her?" There was a pause, while Chloe opened and closed her mouth, looking for

something to say, and Eric tossed me a wave. "See you inside, Cory—I'm going to make sure the boys don't fill up on pie."

Chloe just stood there, searching for words, a reply, anything at all. I wasn't going to make it easy on her.

"I've got things to do before dinner," I said shortly. "And I understand you have to work. You can see yourself out."

I turned around and was almost to the smaller Goddess grove when Chloe suddenly asked, "Who is Adrian?"

I turned halfway. "You wouldn't understand if I told you," I said after a moment. "He used to live in the room with the yellow door." And then I turned back to where Bracken was waiting.

BRACKEN

'Other Foot' Issues

We made up, of course. Well, more accurately, we made love, fast and furiously behind the bole of the giant lime tree in the smaller Goddess grove—it wasn't like I gave my *due'ane* a chance to argue with me, after all.

But the difference between making up and having sex haunted me as I lay with my head on her stomach, scenting lightly at the juncture of her thighs. She smelled like Green, and like me, and like Corinne Carol-Anne Kirkpatrick op Crocken Green—like home. I would not jeopardize that smell, that taste, or that texture for all of the hard quickies in the garden that I planned to have in the years to come.

But it was a good moment, and I have a history of walking all over good moments with my king-sized feet and I didn't want to screw that up either.

"Say it," she murmured, combing her fingers through my hair. I'd had it cut again, right before Green got back. She had bitched about that too.

"Say what?" I protested.

"I can hear it rattling around in your head, Bracken," she said mildly. So mildly that it suddenly felt like saying what I was thinking was not an intrusion into the moment, but an extension of it.

I turned to look at her. Her T-shirt was rucked up to right below her breasts and her bra was poking out the neck of the T-shirt, and her sweatshirt was under her bare hips. Her jeans were pooled with her shoes and one of her socks was about a foot above her head, and her eyes peered brightly at me from under lazy, hooded eyelids.

"Are we good?" I asked, the question rougher on my throat than I had expected. Her lips quirked, and I knew she was about to deliberately misunderstand me. "I mean, are we made up? Have we forgiven each other?"

And now her eyes grew over-bright, and I could have kicked myself all over again, except I knew that she had forced this conversation for the same reason I had thought about it—neither wanted this or any other argument hanging over our heads. Her hand came to touch my cheek, and then she struggled to sit up. I let her.

"I'll always forgive you, Bracken Brine," she murmured, then she stood and started hunting for clothes, shaking her underwear out of her jeans and free of grass before shimmying into them. "It's just that..." She paused, and her tears overflowed and she hid this by brisk motions of putting on her jeans and fastening on her bra and hunting for her other sock.

It was painful to watch.

"It's just what?" I reached above her head to retrieve the sock from the lime tree. I handed it to her and then pulled up my own jeans and did the fly.

She sat down and put her shoes and socks on, dashing tears off her cheeks as she did so. Then she looked up at me with swollen eyes and an expression of such tender pain that I had to swallow past a lump in my own throat. "I can forgive you as often as I need to, Bracken," she said after a moment, "But we keep having the same argument again and again and again, and we will keep having it until you forgive yourself—and him. I'll forgive you every goddamned time, but it will never be 'All good' between us until you forgive Adrian."

My breath caught in my throat, and the backlash, the denial of what she just said was so great that what came out of my mouth next was damn near unforgivable. "Funny you should mention that," I snapped, "Because I could have sworn that what set you off in the first place was being pissed at Green."

Her face went shock white, and her eyes narrowed darkly in the paleness. "You're goddamned right I'm mad at Green," she breathed, seemingly pulled upright to standing by her words alone. "But when I'm ready to yell at Green, you can bet your ass I will be yelling at *Green*, and not you, Bracken Brine—I may be young and stupid but I think I can tell the two of you apart."

Goddess.

I took a step backwards, awed by her anger—and by my shame. Then I lowered my eyes. "I'm sorry," I murmured. "That was wrong of me."

She took a deep breath of her own and reached out and brushed my hand to get my attention. "Right backatcha."

"You don't pull your punches, do you beloved?" I said gruffly, and was rewarded by the slightest quirk of her lips.

"Right backatcha," she repeated, dusting off her bottom and taking another

step away. "I've got to go get ready for banquet." She turned away towards the house.

"Cory, wait..." I felt helpless and bereft, even as she turned back. "Can I come with you?" Goddess, that sounded lame. Then she smiled, a whole complete smile, and her face lit up and she extended her hand.

"I was hoping you would." She leaned her head against my shoulder (well, my upper arm) as we walked up to the house.

The silence was sweet, but not meant to last, and eventually, as we showered and got ready for dinner, she filled me in on what Twilight had said about our enemy. I found myself appalled and sickened—especially when she suggested that she might have something in common with the abomination that had done so much harm.

"You're nothing like him!" I insisted. I was trying not to be angry, but throwing her clothes on the bed with undue force.

She grunted with exasperation, and without comment started pulling on what I had picked out. "I didn't say I was about to start corrupting people's blood and blowing up were-animals," she retorted. "I just said...I guess if I had been angrier and..." she glanced at me sideways, her face softening, "less inclined to love, then I could have been just as vile."

"Never," I said darkly. I don't know how she could see such awfulness in herself, when Green and Adrian and I had only ever seen the light.

She smiled at me then, straightening her clothes, and it was that same soft smile she'd given me over her shoulder. "I love you forever, you know that?" And then she shook her head and took stock of herself in the bathroom mirror.

"You have good taste," she said quietly, looking at the full cotton skirt and sweater that I'd pulled out for her. The skirt was cream colored, but the sweater was a rich forest green—she claimed to have no knowledge of how either garment had ended up in her closet, and I believed her. Green was very good at giving gifts. Now, her fingers moved restlessly to her hair—I'd had the sprites curl it and pin parts of it up so that much of it fell down in little ringlets around her face and neck. It looked romantic and soft, and things she didn't see herself as, but it was also stunning and lovely and I could tell she liked it.

"I could say the same," I teased, and she gratified me with a laugh, and

leaned back into the circle of my arms, dropping her hands from her hair to rest them on my arms.

There was a comfortable silence, one that grew weighty as something grew in her mind.

"What are you thinking?" I asked.

"Green told me about the thing with Adrian and the peaches," she said softly, and I groaned. She turned and kissed me on the cheek. "No—it was sweet. Sweet and chivalric and all sorts of things I can't help but admire—for both of you, actually. No—what I wanted to know was..." She frowned and looked up at me, biting her lip.

"What?" I asked, still trying to overcome my embarrassment.

"What was it like to have Green so mad at you?"

I swallowed, hard. "Horrible. But still not as bad as what I was feeling towards myself. Why?"

She looked down again, chewed on her lower lip, which was not a gesture she usually had. "No reason," she murmured, but it wasn't very reassuring, and my eyes grew wide and my heart thudded in my chest.

"Goddess, beloved—what have you done?"

"Nothing! I've just got this idea...but we'll discuss it at dinner," she smiled gamely.

A knock at the door saved her from more of my questions, but I was left looking forward to the banquet—which I usually enjoy—with a slick, scaly knot of dread, coiling in my stomach and ready to strike.

The knock on the door was Nicky, and I realized that I must have missed him, just a little, when Cory threw her arms around him and kissed him soundly and passionately on the mouth and my jealousy didn't even peek out from under it's complacent basket.

"Nicky, Goddess—I've missed you!" she said breathlessly when the kiss was done, and Nicky stepped back, touching his mouth with wonder and smiling just a little.

"I should leave more often," he said, his voice dazed, and she laughed.

"Well, since I know you can't be gone more than a month, you just go on ahead and do that!" she retorted, and her voice was arch and friendly, and I could tell it wasn't quite the reply Nicky was hoping for. What did he think—that he'd go out and get laid and she'd sit here pining away with jealousy?

"Well, it doesn't just have to be every month..." he said nervously, casting a sideways glance at me.

She had her back to me, so I couldn't see her expression, but I wanted to kick him. It wasn't jealousy—not anymore. I'd overheard enough that night in the garden for me to know that Nicky was not a threat to her love for me. Her enjoyment of his touch didn't change that, and his explosion of sex in her head had been so uncomfortable for both of us that even I had to recognize that I needed to work with him. His venturing out with new lovers proved that he was trying to find a balance, just like we were. But his timing sucked, and whether it was because he was young and callow, or simply terribly self-involved, I suddenly wished for my beloved more than one man who knew when to speak and when to keep his mouth shut.

"No it doesn't," she responded after a pause and an unhappy glance over at me. I nodded encouragement, and she smiled back, and the moment lightened. "But we'll talk about that another time, okay." It wasn't a question, and I realized that that mask she wore in front of everyone but Green and me, the one that said she was in charge of any given situation, had gotten more opaque and detailed in the last three weeks as well. I was one of the privileged two allowed to see behind that mask, and it was troubling to watch her put it on so easily.

They walked arm in arm on the way down to the banquet, with a lot of awkward pauses when Nicky tried to talk about his new lovers. Cory, being Cory, could lighten the tension a little, (*So, does Ellis have more or less finesse as a lover than as a vampire?* She asked acerbically. Nicky's reply had been an enthusiastic *More!*) and a step and a sentence at a time the awkward moment, awkward *relationship* seemed to have evened itself out as we neared the banquet hall. We were about halfway down the staircase when Cory disengaged herself from Nicky and pulled back so that I could take her arm, and I appreciated the gesture.

She beamed up at Green, who sat at the head of the table with Twilight and Grace and Arturo, and there must have been some level of reserve to her smile,

because his gaze sharpened and as she moved in to kiss his cheek, he said lowly, "What have you been thinking beloved?"

"Later," she murmured. "Let's not spoil dinner."

"You'd better not spoil dessert, either," Grace snapped, not letting the pseudo-privacy of the moment bother her.

Cory smiled winningly. "Are the boys here?" she asked, and Grace's soft smile was answer enough.

"They haven't stopped talking about you and the garden," she said softly. "Thanks, Cory—being out of school, away from home—it's been a tough couple of weeks for them."

Cory nodded, and suddenly she was all excited young woman. "It was *awesome*. Green—you should have seen it—I had these big glowing shields around them and they were bouncing in them..." She chatted on and I nodded in the right places—she was right. Her display of power in the garden had been wonderful—controlled, lovely, fun. It was power the way Green used power in his gardens—practice and pleasure and happiness, and it had been one of the things that had made me determined to possess her. I needed to make her mine, to make her forgive me, when she had come searching for me afterwards. How could you not want all of that joy and magic in your arms, if it came willingly?

Now she snagged Green's hand and brought him over to the shape-changer table where Nicky sat down in a seat Renny had reserved for him, and we got there in time to hear Renny introduce Eric, who was also dressed nicely in a sport coat and slacks. Of course Eric had always been a good dresser—even when he was wearing regulation teen-angst, but Renny herself was dressed nicely in a fancy embroidered pair of jeans and a sweater I knew she'd filched from Cory's closet. She spent her time sending Officer Max carefully neutral looks which didn't hide the fact that she was hungry for the sight of his face, and vice versa. Cory and I exchanged bland looks and ignored the by-play as Cory introduced Green to Grace's grandsons.

"We've heard about you!" Graeme said, and Gavin nodded enthusiastically.

"Everybody missed you when you were gone. You're the reason Cory can be a superhero."

Cory laughed and looked abashed. "Green's really the strongest superhero

here," she said softly, "he made all those gardens and this house and he keeps us all safe." A flush was rising to her cheeks, and Green caught my eyes, both of us laughing. She was embarrassed, and it was charming.

Green bent down to the boys and grinned. "I'll tell you a secret my lads—Cory is really the best superhero here at the hill—she just doesn't know it yet."

"He called us lads'," Gavin ooohhed. "Are you from far away?"

Green blinked. He never noticed when his voice and his accent moved into the measures of his birthplace, and the sound of his North Country and his Cockney and even his Lake County sounded so natural to the rest of us, that I don't think anybody had ever mentioned it to him. "I was once," he replied, bemused, "but now I'm from here, right?"

Both boys nodded. "Right," they said in unison, and Green laughed and tousled their recently combed hair, then nodded to the rest of the table. He put a hand on Eric's shoulder and bent down to ask him something. Eric nodded, gave me a warm smile that I returned, and then Grace called to us from across the room, which meant that dinner was about to be served, and we all went back to our seats.

Dinner was, of course, excellent. Grace and her well trained crew didn't miss a step and although I couldn't name half the stuff on my plate (and the only thing Cory could name was 'beef') it went down easy. However, none of my enjoyment of the food could stop the feeling of apprehension that Cory was turning something around in her clever head, and that when it spun out it would be both surprising and terrifying.

Per tradition, when dessert was over, people came up and spoke to Green, Arturo, Grace, and now Cory, about whatever was on their minds. Since Adrian's death, the shape changers had sort of adopted Grace as their own, which made sense, since Cory didn't feed from any of them, and Grace did, but Cory, Grace, and Arturo had all been on the hill, and there were few demands on them tonight. Tonight, most of the audiences needed were with Green.

There was a cadre of the sidhe who ran businesses that was under some pressure from a developer stationed back East to sell the land their businesses were on. Green listened attentively to their situation and nodded decisively. "Right," he said after a moment, "that's tricky, but I think I've got a contact who happens to be right here who can make this go away." He looked over to Eric

and signaled our old play mate over.

"Look who's the big business hot shot," I chided as he approached and he grinned and shook my hand.

"Look who's all married and pussy-whipped now," he shot back, and I could feel my face burn while Cory burst out laughing next to me, spraying her water all over the table.

"That'll be the day!" she gasped. "Boy, Eric, did you get the wrong impression about the two of us."

He bent down and kissed her cheek. "No, Little Goddess, I'd say I got just the right one," he straightened towards Green. "What can I do for you, leader?"

Green outlined the situation and Eric nodded. "I can take care of it in the short term," he agreed. "But Green—this guy...Orland, right?—he's bad news. We can put him off for a bit, but one of these days he's going to be a threat to be dealt with."

Green frowned. "Goddess' get?" he asked.

"Not that I've heard," Eric replied thoughtfully. "But I'm pretty sure he knows about us. He only seems to put pressure on businesses like ours—where the ownership has something to hide."

Green nodded. "I'll listen for the name," he said after a moment, "but for now, if you could take care of it in the short term, we have some more immediate concerns."

"Can you give me hallelujah," I murmured dryly, and the table laughed. Eric declined an offer to sit with us—I think he was hoping for continued acquaintanceship with Nicky, myself—but promised me we'd talk later, and the next group rep came up for an audience with Green.

The banquet hall was clearing out, and Green was looking very relieved as what appeared to be the last of the fey who needed his counsel bowed gratefully and backed away. (It was a cave troll, looking for some help digging out a new cave on the Avian's property at Campfire West—his own cave had been taken over by developers and the property out by Sheraton was pitted with old mineshafts that made up a cave troll's dream home.) With eyes sharpened by intimate knowledge and intuition, he turned to Cory and said "Now, beloved, I'd

love to know what has been eating at you while we've been eating our dinner."

Cory smiled gamely, but was let off the hook when Ellen Beth, hand in hand with Sweet, approached our table in the now half-empty hall.

She looked...well, I'm sure she looked as we all had looked last summer—dazed, devastated, too tired, too thin, too worn, and too full of her own grief to care about the welfare of anyone else. But Green had come out of his haze to lead, I had emerged to remember that I loved Cory, and Cory had pulled her heart out of her misery in order to save her own life and then save us all. But Ellen Beth was a long way from all of that, and Green's hand on her cheek looked like infinite compassion, and as I remembered, felt like boundless tenderness.

"Hello little sister," he said softly, "you must be Ellen Beth."

She nodded quietly. "You must be Green. Sweet keeps telling me you'll make everything all right."

Green grimaced, and looked reproachfully at the tiny sidhe, who, instead of looking abashed, gave Green a sweet and sly smile. "Sweet exaggerates, little sister. But I will do what I can."

Ellen Beth nodded. "Please...Lord Green...the emptiness...it's all consuming..."

Green nodded. "Of course, Ellen Beth. But maybe there's something you can do for us first, yes? So no one has to suffer as you have?"

She nodded. "Whatever I can do, Lord Green."

Green looked over at Cory. "Beloved—do you have any questions?"

Cory nodded and stood up so Ellen Beth didn't have to move. "Ellen Beth—do you remember me?"

The shadow of the young woman Cory had brought home nearly a month ago nodded. "You kept me alive," she murmured. "You told me you'd help me want to live." That last was faintly accusatory.

"You will, Ellen Beth," Cory said softly, "but it will take time. And for you, I think it will take Green." Green put his hand on her shoulder and she felt for it, squeezed, and then returned her concentration to the matter at hand.

"Honey, I need you to remember for me—you told me that Jon Case was dead, right?"

The young woman nodded, her thin brown hair waving at her shoulders.

"Could you tell me what he looked like?"

Ellen Beth blinked. It was such a simple request. "He was really cute," she said, half laughing, like it surprised her to remember. "In his early thirties—he was going back to school for his teaching degree. He had...I don't know...hair like a surfer—brown and gold, right? Dimples at the cheeks. He looked young until you noticed the lines at his eyes."

"What did he wear?" Cory asked, and suddenly I knew where she was going with this, but I couldn't even guess what it could mean.

"Casual, I guess." That wispy smile, surprised at itself, crossed her lips. "So-Cal—big shorts, sweatshirts...if it wasn't so cold he would have been wearing Hawaiian shirts and tank tops, I guess."

Cory nodded. "Thanks, sweetie—I think that's all...oh wait...one more thing."

Ellen Beth looked at her expectantly, any resistance or spirit erased from her body with grief. I thought of Cory, making the decision to go to school in San Francisco in order to reassure all of us at home that she was okay. It occurred to me, not for the first time, that Cory's strength was as important to her as her raw force of will.

"I need to know where he lived," Cory asked gently, and Ellen Beth nodded.

"I have his address in my purse...it's in my..." She looked at Sweet, flushed, "Our...Sweet's room."

Cory nodded. "Tomorrow will be fine," she said with compassion. Then she leaned forward and whispered in Ellen Beth's ear, something so low that even I couldn't hear it, but I could tell from Green's expression that he heard and approved.

He bent forward and kissed Ellen Beth's forehead, then looked at Sweet. "I'll see you both later tonight, if you wish," he said softly, and Sweet nodded,

looking relieved. I knew from watching Green that healing a heart so sodden with grief was exhausting—Sweet obviously needed a little back up. "Give me a few hours, right? A little after midnight then."

The women nodded and Sweet led Ellen Beth out of the banquet room, and Green turned back to Cory. "What?"

Cory smiled a little and raised her eyebrows gamely. "He's not bound to anything, Green—not even his own body."

Green cocked his head and nodded, awaiting more explanation, and our little goddess didn't disappoint.

She sighed and gathered her words, then: "Okay—see, the thing is, when he attacked us, he was using Jon Case's body." She glanced at me. "Bracken wouldn't remember, because the bad guy...fogs up sidhe vision with his evil, I guess. But what Ellen Beth just described to me was the same guy whose heart Brack ripped out a week ago. If you want to make sure, ask Mario and La Mark over here for a description."

"We believe you," Green said, nodding, and across from us Twilight nodded.

"It makes sense," Twilight said.

"And what he does to us...Green, didn't you say the sylphs were...well, piles of dust after he was through with them?" Green nodded, and she went on. "Well, what he does to the were-creatures is similar...he...unmakes them...the force of the Goddess that holds their bodies together, he takes that. It's sort of a cross-over—he wanted to be a vampire, but he had sidhe power—so he's a power vampire as well...it's what he did to Twilight...it's what happened to Chris Williams. Hell—it's what happened to Chuck Granger...except it's not his body that's unraveling, it's his personality. It was easy with Chuck, because even he's blind to what holds himself together, but...well, you all get the picture."

We nodded—it all made sense.

"It's his need," Twilight said softly. "His hunger, his want—he has no morality, no sense of self, no sense of... allegiance to any idea or person or group. He's not human, not sidhe, not even a proper vampire...he's not attached to anything...and he has enough power that this...lack of attachment has become his..." The lovely, sad sidhe struggled for words.

"It's his power," Arturo said bluntly. "His power is to unmake things." Arturo and Cory and Grace all met eyes, remembering the thing that I couldn't. "He's very good at it."

"He is," Cory agreed roughly, "and once he's unbound a soul from a body, I think he can use the body as his own."

"Do you think his own body still exists?" Grace asked thoughtfully.

Cory shrugged, nodded, looked at Twilight for confirmation and he nodded too. "I think it must," Twilight said softly. "He's not immortal—not the way sidhe are. He's too self-involved, I think, to be able to release his hold on his own body."

"And he had somewhere to go," Cory added, looking at me, and now it was my turn.

"That's true. We destroyed Jon Case's body—it was over and done with. But he said he'd be back...I think he must have a place...a lair. Someplace to put his body and return to it when he needs it."

Cory blinked and turned to Twilight. "Brother—how long ago did he unmake you?"

It was Twilight's turn to blink. "I don't know, pretty human girl," he said after a moment, "my time on the streets...one big blur...and time runs different as a sidhe...one lover to the next, you know?"

Cory grimaced and chewed on her lip. "Well...I'd place a bet that he's achieved what he wanted to—that he doesn't age or anything. But since he seems so...unattached, I guess, it would be a shame to risk his body when he can invade someone else's."

There was a grim silence at the table then. This was a formidable enemy indeed. Then Cory cocked her head for a moment, as though something had just occurred to her. "I bet he's in his own body when he attacks us at night," she said thoughtfully. "Like when we were at the store that time. I bet he uses another body in the day."

"What makes you say that?" I asked.

She shrugged. "A guess, really. I don't know—it's just...as a vampire I'd

think he'd just be more comfortable in his own body at night." She laughed, self-conscious since the first time she'd begun the discussion. "Maybe it's just a silly human thing."

Green smiled kindly. "I doubt it," he said softly. "Your instincts on these things are usually pretty accurate. I would imagine the question now is what can we do about him? If he rarely attacks us in a body that's his own, how do we destroy him?"

Cory sucked in a breath, as though shoring up her courage, and said, "Well I have an idea..." And suddenly Grace looked at her in horror.

"Don't say it!" she said bluntly, and we all looked at her in surprise. "Don't say it, Cory!" Grace demanded, ignoring the rest of us. "You can't. I know what you're thinking and...nobody at the table will let you do it and it's just better off unsaid."

Cory blinked, and gave Grace a gentle little smile. "Don't worry, Grace—we're just tossing ideas out here. It's not like I'm going to raid Ellen Beth's purse and track down the address then rush over there and give it a try...I just had an idea and thought I'd run it by people, that's all."

And Grace, rock solid Grace, who dealt with her obnoxious, bitchy daughter with calm and, well, grace, suddenly stood up and started wiping down the table, the expression on her face furious and frustrated and terrified. "Well I'm not even going to listen to it," she said angrily, "and when Green and Bracken tie you to the fucking bed to keep you from trying it, I'm holding the goddamned ropes." And with that she turned around and stalked away, leaving the rest of us blinking after her, completely stunned.

Cory looked at Arturo and made shooing motions, and Arturo looked torn. "I really want to hear your idea, Corinne Carol-Anne..." he said in a pained voice. "Anything that could piss her off that much has got to be entertaining, at the very least."

"I'm sure it's a laugh riot," Green said, his voice flinty, and Cory cringed. "I think we should all hear it before Arturo goes and makes sure Grace is okay."

Cory blew out a breath. "It's just an idea, people—I mean, think about it. This guy...he's sort of like an anti-me, right? He's a human with power, who's gone all wrong, you know? He craves immortality. I know it's not the answer. He

unmakes people, unbinds them. I just spent a significant amount of power helping to bind us all to Green. And every night I go to the vampire quarters and blood more of our people and bind them to me even tighter. I was just thinking that...if I blooded this guy...he'd be bound to us...he'd be assailable, right?"

"Jesus," Arturo breathed, and then looked at Green who was flushing from his throat up and then at me, and I don't know my face looked like, but between the two of us, he sat up hurriedly and said, "I'm going to go calm Grace down." And with that he grabbed Twilight's arm and for a relative newcomer, Twilight must have had a sense of things here at the hill because he practically leapt out of his chair, and then it was just the three of us and Green's terrible anger.

"No," he said flatly. "No."

"It's just an id..."

"NO!" He thundered, and she winced, not exactly surprised, because I think (although she was careful not to talk about things like this) that she had seen Green angry before. "YOU WILL NOT PUT YOURSELF AT RISK LIKE THIS FOR JUST AN IDEA!!!"

She gasped, and her eyes grew bright, then she took a deep cleansing breath and stood her ground. "I don't think I would be," she said softly. And then, stronger because Green's eyes, usually tranquil and warm had actually started to throw off sparks—not just an expression in our species—she added, "Green...listen..."

"I will not let you..."

"Just listen to me!!!" she all but shouted. She almost risked a look at me, then, but decided against it which was probably a good thing because I was starting to catch Green's anger, and I'm often angry and I knew she would see it flushing on my throat and blazing in my eyes. How dare she?

"Both of you, just listen!" she said, softer now, but it didn't matter because everyone left in the banquet hall (mostly the shape-shifter table) was now riveted to the unforeseen drama at the head table, and in this hall, nobody would walk away to even give us the illusion of privacy.

"Green—Bracken's life depends on mine—I know that..." she said softly, tears trembling at her voice.

"So does..."

"Shhh...shhh..." She moved forward, to the space of lovers instead of combatants, and held her hand to his lips. "Don't say it, beloved. Don't say it. I know...in my heart I know, and I refuse to believe its true because you must live forever...you must. I can't live at all unless I believe that, okay. So don't say it. But I know...our existence...as precarious as it is...it relies on all three of us, okay? For better or worse, we're bound together so tightly, by so many strings of love, that if one of us dies, the rest of us...we're doomed." And now tears broke in her voice and my anger faded, but Green's anger was still there, unreasonable, panicked, sparking from his eyes and making his breath quick in his chest. "So do you think, for a minute, that I would risk my life—that I would risk **our** lives — on something that *might* work? On an idea? Green—beloved—it was an idea. It's a possibility. It needs to be thought about, because if something as simple as a vampire blooding could keep this guy from killing any more of us, it should be considered. Isn't that what you've always taught me? That whatever we need to do to protect our people should be considered."

"Not you," he said rawly. "Risking you is no longer an option," his voice rose again, and she stepped back, away from his anger, and from his pain and unreasoning panic. "BY THE GODDESS, CORINNE CAROL-ANNE, I WILL HAVE YOUR WORD ON THIS."

She closed her eyes and fought for control. "I...I don't know how to fight with you, Green. It's not something we do. You need...I've..." She choked on a sob, and her face crumpled, and I sighed and put my face in my hands. Dammit. Goddess fuck it all. Couldn't one of us comfort her tonight? "I've got an anniversary to honor..." she choked out, and then she turned from both of us and fled up the stairs.

"Aww fuck," Green groaned, and even though I blurred to get in front of him, he had taken two steps in her direction before he ran into me with enough force to almost knock me on my ass.

"Goddess, Green...leader...no. Give her space...between you and me today, I think she's had enough of freaked out elves, you know?"

"Right," he said, dazed. "Right. Of course." But his body was still straining against mine to follow her, and from behind me I heard someone running up the stairs. At the last second Green looked away and I knew without looking that Nicky had gone outside to hopefully do what the two of us could not.

The tension sighed from him in a rush, and he sank to his chair with a helpless little sound in his throat and I joined him, my hand solidly on his shoulder. It occurred to me, distantly, how much we all seemed to need from Green, and how rarely he seemed to need something from us, and the honor of being allowed to comfort him was suddenly terrifying.

"What did she mean by that?" he asked, after a moment. "About having an anniversary?"

I shook my head. "I have no idea...I know last night she was wondering what the date was."

Green nodded. "Did you have any idea..."

"Not a clue," I broke in, vehemently.

"Why would she...how could she even think...why would she even dream about putting herself in danger like that?" He was completely amazed, and if I hadn't spent the last three weeks sharing most waking and all sleeping moments with her, then I might have been too.

"Green..." I said hesitantly, "Leader—she's just trying...I mean, can't you see that she's just trying to be you?"

He recoiled back like I'd slapped him. Hard. "I never asked her to do that," he murmured, shocked.

"I know you didn't," I replied as gently as I knew how, "none of us did. You just...you had to have been here for the last three weeks and watch her try so hard to...to get a handle on things. To be our leader because you left her in charge."

"I left all of you in charge!" And he was beginning to sound a little angry, and I couldn't blame him.

"I know it," I said bleakly, "she was just best suited for the job, that's all."

He sighed again, scrubbed his hand over his face. "I think what disturbs me the most is this...assumption...that she and this Hollow Man are related somehow. That they share a kinship beyond the obvious, you know?"

I nodded, remembered her run-in with Chuck Granger, and had an answer, but not one he'd like hearing. "That...detestable asshole..." I began, "the one that

she ran into at school..." I shivered, not even wanting to put it into words. "Humans are stupid, Green. That fucker thought she was trash, and he's not even worth the ground she spits on. She grew up with that. I mean...I didn't really understand, until her mother came crashing into the store wanting to know how she's screwed up her life now, but people...humans...they've undervalued Cory practically since she drew in her first breath. That's why she thinks she has to prove something to us. That's why she thinks she has more in common with Hollow Man than we can ever see. She's been told it exists."

Green shuddered, and for a moment I thought he might actually be ill, physically ill at the table. But he was our leader, and he was all that was compassion and strength, and he swallowed, hard, and nodded. "I forget, sometimes," he said, his voice distant, "how brutal the human world is. I mean we can be cold..." He looked me in the eyes, and we both nodded. We'd both been touched by the frost on our hearts. "Bitterly cold...but humans...brutal. Emotionally brutal. Physically brutal..." He shook his head, came back to the present, looked me in the eyes. "But we can't allow her to pay the price for her species' brutality, brother." He closed his eyes again, and now he was seeing something I could just tell I'd never seen. "I...I could not survive if another beloved had to do that."

He wasn't talking about Adrian, and I wanted to ask, but I found my tongue had bound itself to the roof of my mouth. What came out when it had unstuck itself was both wise and awkward. "I forget, leader, how many years you've lived."

A ghost of a smile touched Green's lips. "I do too—when I'm holding her." Ah, Goddess. Then he shook himself, and the Green we all loved was sitting there by me, when a broken, confused man had been there in his place. "Brother, it's times like this when I wish that we could drink ourselves blind."

I laughed, a little, but my humor was not as strong as my leader's. "Leader, its times like this when I wish I could still offer flesh as comfort," I said formally.

Green inclined his head. "And it would be formidable comfort indeed," he said with a profound gratitude and a wry wink. Then he rose from his chair and said, "But I've waited long enough, and now, I think, I should go apologize to our beloved." And he headed for the stairs. He put his foot on the first step and turned to me. "Is there...anything you'd like me to tell him...while I'm out

there?" he asked delicately.

I closed my eyes and shook my head. "No," but my voice was weaker than it had been on this issue. "Not yet."

"Fair enough," he agreed. "Peace, brother. I'll have her back to you before midnight."

And with that he was gone, leaving me alone at the table, sincerely wishing the same thing he just had. Some nights it would be really helpful to be human, and able to drink yourself blind.

NICKY

Giving Up and Looking Up

I went thundering up the goddamned granite stairs like some sort of idiot on a white charger when I heard another voice echoing from the crown of the hill.

I was so surprised I turned into a bird instantly.

I flew into the Goddess' grove in a swish of silent feathers, and perched in the branches of one of the biggest oak trees, looking down in shock at the two figures sitting close on Adrian's marble memorial bench.

The one who wasn't the love of my life was nearly transparent, and the memory of moon-white hair fluttered under her careful fingers.

"You're so upset, luv...I don't know how to comfort you..." Adrian was saying. (It must have been Adrian—was there any other ghost with white hair who would be comforting Cory in this place?) He sounded distraught, and I was a little surprised. Weren't ghosts supposed to be either angry or at peace? Stupid question. I shook my head, bird style, fluffing the feathers at my neck.

"It's okay," Cory sniffled, "I mean...he's been furious with all of us at one time or another...he only gets this mad at people he loves, right?" A breath of air was forced from her. "Either that or people he's about to kill."

"Well, I think you're going to live." Adrian had that same dry humor Green did, I thought in shock. I don't know why this surprised me...I guess...I guess I

had expected a saint. Saint Adrian, patron of lost souls, converter of the damned to the saved, Goddess style.

"Hope so," Cory replied, her voice growing sharp and spirited. "Thanks to Bracken, I'm starting to like make-up sex."

Adrian's ghost laughed outright, then, and the feathers down my back stood to attention. He sounded like bells. His laugh was followed by a sweet and comfortable silence, which Adrian broke by saying, "So, luv...happy anniversary?"

Cory nodded. "Yeah..." She had been huddled on the bench, her eyes focused on the transparent hands resting on her own warm, human ones, I think. Now she looked at Adrian's face and I could see the honest, bittersweet smile on her tear-stained face. "Here's to the day I finally looked up."

"I'm so glad you did," he murmured quietly—almost too quiet for even my bird senses to register.

"Are you sure, Adrian?" she asked, her voice low. "I mean...I put you through hell...and then...I mean...you might still be...well, here, if I hadn't been on that hill."

"You know what love is, right luv? It's when you're more afraid of losing love than losing life..."

She laughed then, and it was a bittersweet sound. "I said those exact words to Bracken about two months ago."

"And how is fuckhead, then?" Adrian asked, and I was so surprised at the dry epithet that I almost screeched. Cory wasn't surprised at all. She laughed, and again, the sound was bittersweet. I wondered, there in the night filled with the smell of prey and the feel of wind, when was the last time I'd heard her make a truly happy sound in her throat, without words to back it up.

"He's..." she sighed. "He's picking fights with me that he needs to be having with you, A'," she said after a moment, "but...he's also being truly wonderful...and...so wise. I mean...he was probably always wise, but...we don't always see it because he's got such stiff competition, you know?"

"I wasn't wise tonight," Green said softly from the trap door, and I fluttered my feathers in surprise. It was a good thing all of the players in this little drama

had better things to think about than me, I thought miserably. I didn't want to be here...I so didn't want to be here...but here I was, and I found it impossible to look away. Adrian was beautiful, I thought in awe, with that new sensibility I'd developed since I'd spent nights in Green's arms. He had pointed features, cheekbones so prominent they were almost elfin, wide spaced eyes, and a pointed, poignant vulnerability to his translucent expressions. He was beautiful, and wry, and human. And he'd given his life (or undeath) to save the two people I now loved best in the world, and how do you compete against that, how can you compete against that when all you ever wanted was to live, to live and to love and to know that the people you love with all your heart love you back?

"Impossible for you not to be wise, beloved," Cory murmured back. I saw her hand reach instinctively for Adrian's, and Adrian reach back, and when their hands touched...nothing...a wave of pain so intense I could almost hear it rolled off of woman and ghost so powerfully it almost knocked me off of my perch in the sky.

"I hate to interrupt your anniversary," Green said, striving for lightness, "but I can't for the life of me think of what it could be the anniversary of."

Cory laughed, the bitter sound that was starting to make me cringe. I could suddenly see why elves hated deception of any kind. That laugh alone was a lie, an attempt to deflect us all from whatever she was really feeling. Would the Goddess strike an elf with nausea and cramps for a laugh like that?

"The end of my blindness and the beginning of my stupidity," she said harshly, and a translucent hand reached ineffectually to stroke her face. She met Adrian's eyes, and I realized that although I couldn't see her face from this angle, I could see her beloved's eyes. They were the most amazing shade of blue—so blue they were the only real color in the moonlight, and I could see them from my perch in a tree overhead.

"The beginning of your awakening, Corinne Carol-Anne," Adrian's ghost said softly, "that's nothing to be ashamed of."

"I'd worked at your gas station for a year and a half, Green," she said in a harsh whisper, "a year and a half, right? And one night I look up and Arturo touches my hand, and holy shit, there's this whole world out there I never imagined. And the next night I look up, and there's Adrian. And he's beautiful, and he seems to think I'm pretty interesting...but...I didn't believe him. I mean...how could I be that interesting, it had to be a scam, right?"

"Oh, my loves..." Green said, "A'—how could you let her do this to herself?"

"I can't seem to stop her, beloved," Adrian said, and there was an edge of exasperation, of humor to his voice that would have made me break cover if I were in human form, but birds can't really laugh, not even in surprise, so I was safe.

"So he's got to court me, right?" Cory said, right over them. "He's got to court me, and badger me and every night I go home and dream of him and wonder about him, and suddenly every thought, every wish I've ever had about love and sex and wanting is centered on him...but... but I looked up in February, right? So a year ago, I looked up, and saw him...but Green, I was too scared to reach for him until the beginning of May. And I didn't know..."

"None of us knew..." Green soothed, but she was distraught, and I couldn't blame her. The news of her fight with Bracken had spread like wildfire, and we'd all seen her fight with Green, and now here she was, lost, lost in a past that would forgive her, had forgiven her, if only she would let it.

"But I'm mortal...of all of us, shouldn't I have known? Shouldn't I have guessed that there's not enough time...that there's never enough time, and that looking up isn't enough, looking up is never enough, you have to give too? You have to risk, and you have to give of yourself, or you'll never get anything back? I was so afraid to give him any part of me, Green...so afraid to give him my heart that I almost missed that chance to see what he could give me..."

Green and Adrian shared a look that broke my heart, then Green's real, warm and living arms were around her shoulders, and Adrian was a breath of a kiss on her brow and a fade of translucent pain into the trees.

"That's all I wanted to do..." Cory sobbed. "I wanted to give you peace, and your hill peace, because you've given me everything and I just wanted to give you an end to this, to give you something, anything, to make you happy..."

"You want to give me something?" Green asked roughly, and if my feathers hadn't been sticking straight up already they would have ruffled up on their own, because his voice was angry and taut and urgent and throbbing with desire. Anything or anyone for a hundred mile radius must have just flushed and swollen to simply be near the same air I was breathing.

"Anything..." she said, her voice equally rough, and all of a sudden I *really* needed to get the hell out of that garden.

"Then give me," he groaned, and took her mouth with his own, and she returned the kiss fiercely, their rush potent and sensual and painful and all of the things I had never felt from either of them. Their kiss broke, and she trembled as he framed her face with his hands. "Give me," he said again, and their next kiss was even hotter, even more potent, then she was kissing her way down his newly bared chest and his shaking hands were both pushing on her head and trying to pull her up in that conflict of wants that I recognized but had never felt.

Cory wanted just as much as Green...she wanted to give and give and give, and she kissed her way down to his pale, soft stomach, and she bit softly. His knees buckled and he sat heavily on the marble bench behind him, and then his belt was undone, and then his slacks, and then his phallus was bare and bright and palely jutting from his crotch in the moonlight, the head darker, and glistening slickly.

"Give me..." he ordered roughly, and I couldn't remember him ever ordering me to do anything when we were together. The trust and the need would have made me weep if I had been human.

"Anything..." she murmured around the head of his cock, and he groaned and knotted his hand in her hair and pushed, and she resisted. Instead, she licked and tasted and nibbled, and then devoured, her lips burrowing in the golden hair at Green's groin and then riding up him to lick and taste and nibble again. My breathless silence, my terrible arousal, my shameful secret witness was interrupted by a soft, reproachful bird-like sound. I looked up to see Mario, in bird form, his head angrily cocked to one side and his beak gesturing imperatively to the night sky, which is where we should have been.

I nodded, dazed, and we both launched into the air, but for me there was no joy in flying, only desperate flight. I soared, I fled, I ran in flight and Mario followed from a distance, powerful and calm on bigger wings and calmer wind.

Eventually I tired and turned back for home, touching down on the center lawn, the one you could see from Green's sitting room. It made me think human thoughts, and in a rush and a turn, I no longer wanted to be a bird. In a skin-shifting ruffle, I was standing, barefoot, in the garden.

"Aww shit!" I said, trying to still my pounding emotions, my rushing heart.

"I lost my shoes in trans." We did that sometimes—our clothes were carried in the oils from our feathers, and if we didn't concentrate, or if we taxed ourselves too severely, the oil got thin and something had to go.

"I wasn't wearing any in the first place," Mario said brightly. "So, did you get to see enough, or should we put some fiber optics in their room?" he added, an edge of anger to his voice.

"I didn't mean to..." I choked, feeling lame. "I went up to...I don't know, comfort her, after her thing with Green...I mean, she got into a *fight*, with *Green*...right? So Bracken's busy taking care of Green, and...I'm the third string, it's time for me to play, right?"

"I don't think she does birds," Mario said flatly, and I shook my head, wondering if I could justify my presence in that holy place to Mario or to anybody.

"Did you know Adrian haunts the garden?" I whispered.

He'd been pacing in front of me, like an angry father, and that stopped him. "Adrian? Like St. Adrian?"

I laughed and it was that same sound I'd heard coming from Cory's throat. "The one and only. I was so goddamned surprised when I heard them talking I turned."

And now Mario laughed, and unlike me, he was truly amused. "Well..." he said, gesturing helplessly. "I guess why not, right?" I nodded, but then he remembered he was outraged again. "But after that—why not fly away?"

I just looked at him, and he thought about it for a minute, and suddenly his anger faded, and he sank to ground, bare feet tucked under his knees and as suddenly as we went from bird to human, he went from outraged father to good friend. "Yeah...a chance to see St. Adrian himself... I guess I'd violate a little bit of privacy to see that."

Well, I might as well finish, I thought sadly. He knew how much I'd seen as it was. "And after that...I don't know...I guess I was just so hungry to see them...and..." And my voice broke I wondered if I had ever been a man. "They glowed," I rasped, sinking miserably down in the grass next to Mario.

"I know," Mario said, not surprised at the least. "If you go by her room

when she's with Bracken, you can see a light show coming from under the door.”

That so did not make me feel better. "She doesn't glow with me," I said, painfully. "Green doesn't glow with me. Together, they practically set the sky on fire. But not with me.”

Mario sighed. "Jesus," he said, and then scrubbed his face with his hands. "Jesus, Nicky—okay, we can't pretend we didn't see it, right? And I'll be honest...it was the most erotic thing...one of the most beautiful goddamned things I've ever seen. I can't even wish I could take it back, brother. I wish I could but I can't. But what you've got to ask yourself, see, is what did you learn by being graced with something like that.”

"Learn?" I echoed stupidly. I heard another presence coming up beside us in the night, listening unashamedly from behind a tree nearby, but I was in no position to judge or be angry about eavesdroppers right now, so I let it be.

"It's like...I know your folks are still together, and still happy as far as you know, right?”

I nodded. They'd been writing, wanting to meet my mate. I'd put them off with one thing or another, because the situation was so beyond their understanding.

"Well...my dad raised me. I mean, my mom was still alive, but she was human...the whole bird thing freaked her out. So, by the time I was old enough to figure it out, it was like, once a month my dad went by her place when her real husband was at work, and she lifted her housecoat, bent over the counter, and he threw her some money on the table and left.”

My stomach turned. "Eww," I said quietly.

"Yeah. Eww. I waited a long goddamned time for Beth. I wasn't waiting for a female Avian, because the odds of that were...astrofuckinomical, right? So you can imagine my shock when I found one. But I was waiting for...someone. Someone special. And it's okay...well, not okay, but it's like, even though we didn't have that long together, I'm okay with waiting, because she was special, and it was worth it, right?”

I nodded. I'd been waiting for someone special as well, and I'd thought I found her. When it turned out she didn't want me back, I thought I'd get over it, and move on. Life didn't always work out like we planned.

"I know what happened to you—being bound to Green and Cory when neither of them wanted you—I know that it sucks. It was a...metafuckingphysical accident and it sucked and you're thinking there's nothing you can do about it." And here Mario turned to me, his brown eyes fathomless in the dark, "But the thing is, Nicky, you've got a lot to be thankful for, and you don't even seem to realize it."

I blinked. No one—not even Leah, whose entire presence on the trip had been brutally frank—had actually said this to me. "Yeah?" I asked.

Mario nodded. "Yeah." Rock solid and sure. "And not just because you get to lay anything with a pulse—although you'd better believe me when I tell you that's about all the rest of us are talking about now."

I flushed. "I didn't realize everybody knew," I said quietly.

"Are you kidding? After Leah got back you're lucky she didn't take an ad out in the Auburn Journal."

I felt marginally better. Cory and Green hadn't been talking, at least.

"She said you were having a blast, and we were happy for you. I mean... half of the reason Green left the hill was to see if that whole binding thing with the sylphs would work. And I had a word with him before dinner, and he said it might—you know, Tommy and Dennis, La Mark—they might not have to, like doom themselves, to love the people they want, and I'm so goddamned overwhelmed with what Green has done for us that I can barely look at him, you know? We've got a leader here that will work to make us happy...Goddess—you remember Goshawk? We were so desperate for a leader that we followed that douche bag, and now we've got Green? That's luck in itself, and he's not just taking care of us as a people, he's taking care of you as an individual and that's pretty fucking special. And on top of that, you get, like every Avian's secret wet dream—you get to have your Twinkies and eat them too—with both kinds of cream filling. I mean, I'm seventy freaking years old and still in my sexual prime—don't think I haven't thought about it a time or two."

I looked at him in total shock. Mario looked twenty-five. We didn't age until we mated, which meant...

"Yeah—I was a sixty-five year old virgin before I found Beth." He was quiet then. "She was just barely past the age of maturity when we met. I never

told her...how old I was. I just enrolled in college, because I'd been a no count *churro* my whole long life, and I liked school so much I kept going, even after she died. And I'm still going, because I like the classes and I like the company and I really like the idea of doing what Cory's doing and learning something that will help Green on the hill—and if you tell anyone that, I'll deny it.”

“Of course,” I said, feeling both humbled and miserable. Was everybody here a better human being than I was?

“So here's the deal. You get to live every bird-man's sexual fantasies, you get to share the bed of a really good looking man-god whenever he's feeling lonely, and he has his choice of bed partners, including his beloved whom he adores, so that's saying something. And once a month, this really pretty girl whom you love unrequitedly, gets dressed up to go on the town. She smiles at you, dances with you, makes you feel special, and then she puts out to save your life. But she never rubs it in. She never makes you pay. She doesn't just hike up her housecoat and bend over. She treats you like a friend. She treats you like a lover even. And just because she doesn't lie to you, you've forgotten just how good your life is.”

“Excellent,” I said bitterly. “I'm an ungrateful shit—I get it.”

“No man—you really don't. What were you looking at out there tonight? What did you see that you don't see in the movies, or in bed with Leah or Willow or Ellis? What was it out there that broke our hearts?”

I thought about it. I thought about it so long that the silence lengthened, and my bird senses were still tuned to the night so I heard our unseen companion sigh, and it sounded sympathetic. For some reason that made it easier for me to speak the truth.

“Giving,” I said after a moment, “because they'd give anything for each other. Cory and Bracken and Green...all three of them...they're so bound together with love that it hurts them not to give.”

Mario nodded. “So, brother—you've had a shitty deal, and I'm not here to dispute that. I'm not here to make you feel bad about it or to tell you to buck up because it could be worse, because you're a smart kid—you know it could be worse and you know that what makes it worse is that you've got a front row seat to so much better. But what you've got to ask yourself is—what do you have to give to these people?”

"I'm a human battery, Mario," I said, and I wasn't even bitter about this, because a small part of me thought it was sort of cool. "Doesn't that count?"

Mario sighed. "Nicky—is it raining here?"

"No..."

"Well it's raining or sleeting or snowing all over the rest of fucking Nor-Cal...but it's not raining on our heads, why the hell is that?"

"Green controls the weather," I said, and it felt silly to say it, even though we all knew it was true.

"It's what he does—it's his power, acting on his land. We don't even count that as giving, right? So no—being a human battery doesn't count. What else can you give?"

I put my head in my hands. "I don't know, Mario—I don't have a fucking clue. That's half the problem—I don't have anything I can give to them. They don't love me like they love each other, and I don't have anything I can give to make that better..."

"Oh yes you do, Nicky—don't you see? The one thing you can give to them, to Cory, to Green, even to Bracken who, I think, has shown a great deal of restraint in not strangling you for just breathing his woman's air, is your acceptance of the situation at hand, you know? Just accept. It will stop hurting you, and you will stop hurting them, and when all that hurt has gone away, it will just be you and the people you love and maybe a little joy left to spare, right?"

"Yeah," I whispered. "Yeah." Because he was right. He was wise and right and I should know it by now, but what you tell your heart and what it tells you are not always the same thing. I sighed and looked around me.

On Green's hill at least, it was a good night. Chilly, so I was glad for my sweater and quick metabolism, but only a little misty so I thought maybe I could stay out there on the lawn, near the little grove of trees and the pool for a while without freezing my ass off. As we sat there, in the quiet, scenting the night, we heard the figure nearby in the grove of trees move, just a little, in a way that spoke of great patience.

That seemed to be Mario's cue. He stood and gripped my shoulder. "Think about it, brother," he said softly. "I'm going to go flying, because Green's going

to let it piss rain all day tomorrow, and I won't get too much of a chance." He took a few steps, and then turned, nodding towards where our watcher sat, waiting. "And Nicky—remember that of all the things they've given you, kindness is the most important."

"I never forget it," I said, but I nodded as well, because now I knew who was in the grove, and I knew what Mario was trying to tell me, and it shamed me that he'd think I'd be such a self-involved prick to be cruel to a guy who had only treated me with kindness since the four of us in the care package had all spilled into Green's hotel room a week ago, exhausted, charged, and giddy with our own sexual daring.

And then he was a bird—a much bigger bird than I am with a wing span that defied the eyes and handsome mocha colored wings. He was so strong and so beautiful in the night sky that it was just a pleasure to watch him lift gracefully into the air and disappear into the dark.

When Mario's last wing flutter had died, ghostlike, against the mist, I got up and moved to the little grove of trees, where Eric sat, looking meditatively into the small, clear pool of water in the middle. Deciding he'd been patient enough I flopped down next to him with a grunt—sort of that all-American male greeting that we know and understand.

"Your friend is very wise," he said quietly.

"Yeah," I murmured. Mario and I hadn't hardly said two words to each other when we'd served under Goshawk for nearly six months. Now he was my friend. "People surprise you that way."

"Mmm. Cory surprised me. I was kind of hoping I wouldn't like her, you know." I turned to him, eyebrow raised, hoping he'd go on. "I mean...I left the hill twenty years ago, because I was falling in love with them—all of them. Bracken, Adrian, Green—I didn't want to be the only one not invited to the banquet table, right?"

Brother did I know that. "Right."

"But then, Grace always cooks a little rich for my blood during banquet anyway," he said, with a sweet laugh. Maybe it takes time for the bitter to fade from the sweet, I thought hopefully. Maybe Cory and I wouldn't always sound like we were eating our hearts with wormwood for salt.

"What would you rather eat?" I asked, not sure if the question was inane or profound.

"Rabbit," he said promptly, his boyish face alight with a coyote's glee.

"Me too! Cooked or raw?" I was laughing, because it was the first time it occurred to me that a predator was a predator whether it flew on wings or padded around on oversized feet.

"That depends, now doesn't it?" He looked at me slyly, sideways, as he laughed and for maybe the first time in my life I realized that, when it wasn't a matter of life or death or mate or murder, flirting was fun.

"Yeah..." I trailed off because I didn't have a funny answer to that, and suddenly all my contact with Cory reared its brutally frank head, and I found that I badly wanted to talk honestly to this kind man. "Why did you come out here, Eric?" I asked, a painful longing in my voice. I wanted...I wanted this nice man to want me, I thought with a bump in my heart.

"Oh Goddess..." he laughed, and although he was much older than me, his voice cracked like a teenager's. "I'm always so nervous at this part, you know?"

So was I. "It's weird..." I said, not able to look at him in the moonlight. I concentrated on the still pond in the moonlight instead, and was not altogether reassured when I was suddenly reminded of Bracken and Adrian. "I mean...all that time in the hotel room, and on the road...you'd think we could just...do this..." We had been naked together—had been *inside* each other, if it came to that. But the orgy ended when we arrived home, and the others had gone their way easily enough. Not Eric. He'd slept (truly slept) on my bed last night—we had both been exhausted from the trip, but we hadn't touched or spooned or even given any acknowledgement of the sexual frenzy we'd just spent our last week in. But Eric had said good morning to me as I'd left for school, and had been one of the first people I'd seen when I'd come home. Eric had been kind, and funny, and he seemed to know first-hand what it was like to have a front row seat to the banquet, but not to savor the taste.

"It's different," he said, and I could smell the nervousness in his voice. It made my desire stronger. "There's a difference between tumbling around naked like socks in a drier, and..."

"And making a pass at someone you like," I finished for him.

"And making a pass at someone you want," he corrected from a dry throat.

"It feels good to be wanted," I said, risking a look at him. He was nearly twenty years older than me, but he looked...he looked young. He looked vulnerable, and afraid, and this, I realized, is what I had missed in my first foray into living my life and not Green's and Cory's. He was putting a part of his heart out on the line, in a way Leah and I had not done with each other—hell, in a way I hadn't even ever done with Cory. Cory's words from the garden, hysterical, self-recriminating, came back to haunt me.

"What do *you* want, Nick?" he asked, meeting my eyes with what felt to be a painful effort.

I moved closer to him, risked putting a hand on his thigh, moved my face in towards his, until we could see the actual color of each other's eyes in the moonlight and feel our breath mingling in the chill. His were blue-grey, and he had crinkles at his eyes that I hadn't earned yet, and a smallish, full lipped mouth, that puckered like a cupie-dolls when it was closed. I wanted to feel that mouth under my fingertip, but I kept my hand on his thigh, because it was taut and muscled and real.

"I want to give," I said honestly. He smelled like warm animal and desire. He smelled like hunger. Beneath my hand his thigh muscles flexed, and I itched to touch the skin under his slacks. I itched to taste his body, to feel it arch and tighten under my hands, my lips, my tongue. "I want to give to someone who wants what I have to give...I want to give until I know how to laugh sweet, like you, and I can make you laugh like that again."

He nodded, one tension flowing out of him, another, more wonderful kind taking its place. "Then give me," he whispered, and hands tangled in my hair and his lips met mine, and I began my lesson and gave and gave and gave.

CORY

Therapy

"Give me..." Green's hands were tight in my hair, demanding, and I found myself ravenous for him when I should have been done, sated, replete.

"Anything," I whispered against his cock, letting it slip through my mouth

and slap me gently on the cheek before taking him into my mouth again.

He groaned, and his hands were rough. Green was never rough, and his urgency, his lack of finesse, made me want him in the back of my throat, made me want him everywhere. I took him there, to the back of my throat, and his next sound was even more raw, more urgent, and suddenly his hands were under my arms, and that carefully shielded side strength was at work as he hauled me up effortlessly until I was straddling him, my knees on the rough stone of the bench, the center of my body poised over his glistening phallus. Moving with the violence of speed and want he reached under my skirt and ripped my cotton panties off, crotch first and shoved me willingly down on top of him.

I wasn't ready. I was swollen, and the friction of him rubbing on my tender, used sex was such an exquisite pain, such a rough pleasure that I screamed, "yes..." so he wouldn't stop.

"Give me...." he demanded again, and I was helpless to deny him.

"Anything..." I told him, meeting his mouth and letting him possess me with lips and teeth and tongue. He moved me up and thrust himself into me again and again and I collapsed against him, barely able to sustain consciousness, much less hold my weight up, and still he pounded, as I gasped helplessly into his shoulder, begging him, pleading with him to bring me, to make me come.

One rough, long fingered hand reached in front of me to touch my little bundle of nerves, and another grasped my bottom, a clever, clever finger sliding between the cleft, finding the other place, the one nobody talks about, and probed, invaded and now I did scream because it was terrible, unbearable, gorgeous and I needed to come.

"Give me..." he shouted, and his eyes were burning, and he was demanding a response from my body that we usually avoided, because it was unpredictable, because I did great and terrible things when I was this frantic but my orgasm was coming, my power was coming and I was moaning uncontrollably and powerless to stop it.

"Anything..." I moaned again, "Oh, God, Green, please..."

"Everything..." he corrected, and I closed my eyes and thought "seat cushions" because my knees were raw and then I shoved my self down over his

member, over his busy invading fingers, until I felt him against my cervix and deep inside of me. The pain and the pleasure were too beautiful and stars exploded behind my eyes and my throat was rough with shouting and I came and came and came and so did he, both of us shivering, jerking, trembling with the force of what we'd brought into our bodies.

"Everything," I whispered against his neck, when it had all subsided.

He cupped the back of my head in his big hand and stroked my hair. We didn't move for a long time after that, and when I finally moved it was to look up to his rough chuckle.

"Seat cushions?" he asked.

"My knees hurt," I said mildly, peering at the thick cotton cushions that were now under my knees—in fact, they were full length down the bottom and back of the granite bench.

Green was instantly contrite. "I'm sorry...I should have..."

"Don't you dare be sorry for that!" I ordered. "Don't think about being sorry, don't imagine being sorry, don't pretend not to be sorry when you are..." I trailed off, too tired and too replete to even stay angry over this. "Just don't," I murmured. "Just hold me..." Abruptly I was falling asleep on his chest, and he was still inside me.

"Nice colors, luv," he said, a smile in his voice as he let me fall asleep.

I cracked my eyes open. They were olive green, scarlet, and twilight purple. I had just enough left in me to shake my shoulders. "Come colors," I said crudely.

Green shifted, that amazing strength able to pull his pants up with one hand while the other lifted me against him. I sighed when he was no longer inside me, because that feeling never seems to last long enough. "What colors?" he asked when we were situated again—although it felt like I'd never moved my head from his chest.

"The colors I see behind my eyes when we explode," I said thickly. A part of me reflected that it had been one hell of a day.

"At least we know you're starting to control it..." he mused, and I could

tell he was thinking something important and I was suddenly tired of important.

"And we gave Adrian a hell of a show," I murmured.

"Not just Adrian, I think..." So softly I barely heard him, and I was too tired to ask. "I think I have to give you to Bracken now, luv."

"Mmmm..." It was the last noise I remember making before being slid into one of Bracken's T-shirts and into bed. When Bracken moved next to me I burrowed into him and slept until the alarm went off the next morning.

Green's homecoming was over. It was time to get back to real life.

"I think you should go see Hallow," Bracken insisted as we walked out to the track.

"No." I'd been walking stiffly all day—what can I say? In a life of rather spectacular sexual activity, the previous 36 hours had been something pretty special.

"You're in pain!" he insisted.

"I'm uncomfortable!" I returned. "Women have been living with it for years."

"Well you shouldn't have to." I turned to him and grinned.

"Give it a rest, oh mighty warrior/sex god," I told him dryly, "you did your part here too. Now let me run and some of this will work itself out." I hoped so—I was going for a mile and a half today, and I didn't know if I knew Davy well enough to explain why it was going to be a bit tougher than usual.

"Why won't you just go to Hallow?" he asked, damn his persistence.

"It's not our day anyway," I evaded, unwilling to explain human embarrassment one more time when I wasn't sure why I still had it.

"No," he said shortly. "It's Renny's."

We were both silent then, because Max had met us at Renny's door this morning, hastily dressed in boxers and nothing else, and looking sheepish and uncomfortable.

"Oh...gees..." I said painfully. "Max...this was so not a good idea..."

"It's the one thing we don't need words for," he answered, evading my eyes.

I'd patted his cheek and wished him well and now I wished more than ever that Renny had come with us to school because of everybody who talked to Hallow, she needed it most.

"Nicky's taking her time slot today," I told Bracken now. And Nicky needed the time too. Before we'd even had a chance to knock on his door, he'd been on his way out—only stopping to give Eric a long, lingering kiss in the doorway. Eric had met my eyes with thinly disguised apprehension, but I'd winked and smiled, and he'd been relieved. Actually I was relieved as well. I felt a lot better about Nicky and Eric than I'd felt about his freefall into free love. Maybe because I knew him—I knew what he'd wanted for himself before Green and I had come along and screwed up his life, and random copulation had never been in his plans. "C'mon—Davy's waiting."

"This human worries me," Bracken said suddenly, so suddenly I stopped my trot out to the track and he almost plowed into me.

"I'm sorry?" I asked, genuinely puzzled.

Brack wouldn't meet my eyes. "She's vulnerable, she's alone—and you want to protect her, and it's only natural...but it's not your place and..." He shook his head. "You will blame yourself if something happens to her," he said at last.

I swallowed, because he was right, and tried a game smile. "She's on twenty-four hour sprite watch, Bracken—even I know that's all we can do, right?"

He nodded, and I reached up to kiss him, and then we both continued out to the track, but his words niggled at me, especially after Davy joined me on the track and we started our warm-up round, her sprites chirping in unnoticed colors above her head. Davy was chatty and blithe and positive—but she wasn't stupid. Kyle obviously loved her, and I don't think he wanted to mess with her mind any more than necessary, and now, after the other night, she was left with some serious questions.

"So...Cory...I've got to ask..." she started after a few paces, "are you and Bracken...I mean is Kyle...are you guys into anything...I don't know...illegal?"

In spite of the seriousness of the question, I had to laugh. "No," I said simply, "in fact, I think Green's businesses are run more aboveboard than most." Because he had to be above reproach in all the obvious places, so no one would look hard to figure out that "Green Inc." was actually the same guy running the show since the gold rush. "Why do you ask?"

Davy shook her head. "It's just...I hope you won't take this the wrong way, but I got this feeling that Kyle knew who you were before we walked in the other night...and that he was really ready to not like you."

I nodded, still out of breath enough to be glad she was doing most of the talking. "You'd be right."

"Why wouldn't he like you?" I risked a smile at her. She liked me. After Chloe's antipathy, Renny's nervous breakdown and the mess I'd almost made of my entire love life last night, it was good to have someone on my side.

"Let's just say that Kyle's last boss and Green had some...serious differences of opinion," I understated, "and Kyle had some good reasons to think I was not a nice person, but he didn't know the whole story either."

Davy thought about that for a few beats of our shoes on the rubber track. We were running in the rain, which I found exhilarating, but she was wearing a rain poncho. I wondered how she could breathe with that thing on. "That's really vague," she said at last.

"It is," I replied honestly. "But..." I sighed—as much as I could, anyway. "Davy—there's just some stuff that Kyle has to tell you. I'd love to. I...I'm not good at dodging questions or any of that shit. But Kyle's your..." I fought not to say 'beloved' because she would think it was just a quaint word, but to us it meant so much more. "Kyle's your boyfriend, and he's known you longer, and most of my secrets are his to tell and not mine, okay?"

"Okay," she said unhappily, "I just don't know...I mean...when I'm with the two of you, it doesn't seem like there's any secrets at all...you're just... real, you know? It's only later when it seems like you have something to hide."

"We are real," I said, and it felt like one of the most honest statements I had ever made. "Davy—if you believe nothing else, believe that we're real." Her boyfriend was a vampire. I was a sorceress. The irony was, we were as real as it got.

"So, where's Renny today?" she asked, making a concerted effort to lighten the moment.

"Boyfriend troubles," I replied, and changed the topic to Renny and Officer Max, which, as much prevarication as it involved, actually seemed to be a safer topic. But the conversation bothered me. I hated lying—even halfway, like I was with Davy—and Bracken was so right. The more I knew her, the more I felt responsible for her. At this point my anger at Kyle was escalating past reason. His silence wasn't letting me do my job! It seemed perfectly clear to me, but somehow Bracken and Green got it all turned around.

That night as we were all sitting in the living room, studying, Green asked me casually how my meetings with Hallow were going.

"Fine!" I said brightly. "Nothing to report, really."

Bracken looked at me darkly. "Actually," he said, with an evil glance my way, "Yesterday was our day and we missed it."

"Like I said," I returned blandly, "Nothing to report."

"Bracken?" Green asked, and I had the feeling he knew anyway, because, dammit, Hallow wasn't a legal therapist and Green wasn't a twenty-first century human male, and although Hallow wasn't about to go blabbing everything we said to Green, he was going to keep him apprised as to how his people were doing.

"She's absolutely correct," Bracken replied. "There's nothing to report because she doesn't tell him anything."

"That's not true!" I protested. It felt like I'd been doing nothing but spilling my guts for the last four weeks!

"The hell it isn't...Hallow talks, I talk, we totally force you to respond, and whatever you say is so cryptic we need a damned 'Earth to Cory' decoder ring to figure it out."

I shot Bracken an evil look of my own. "Oh really? Do you have it with you? Can you figure out what I'm thinking right now?"

"Define the cosine vector, *due'ane*," he replied mildly, sneaking a glance at the muted television to watch the Kings waste another play-off opportunity.

"We're still on number three."

I took a deep breath and concentrated on my knitting. I was sitting on the floor, leaning on the couch between Green's knees as he worked on his laptop. Bracken was sitting on the other end of the couch, his legs extended towards me. Every now and then I reached out and stroked Green's calf or the curve of Bracken's instep, and then returned my busy hands to the needles and cable hook. Green's sweater had two different cables on it. I was so proud of the crawling things that worked their way up the silk/cashmere that it was all I could do not to jump up and make both the men fawn all over my accomplishment like spaniels, but somehow, I didn't think they'd think it was as cool as I did.

"Cory..." Nicky said from the couch across from us. He was leaning against Eric, with his feet up on the arm of the couch, and Eric was reading a book on business law. Just the fact that the book wasn't putting him to sleep impressed the hell out of me.

"I know you know the answer," I said grumpily, "Give me a second here."

"The cosine vector is 200 miles per hour," Nicky said calmly. "If you didn't know it five minutes ago, you're not going to know it now. What I was going to say was, talking to Hallow will help."

"Oh Jesus, not you too..." I whined. I recognized it as a whine, but, dammit, they were ganging up on me. "Renny—anything to add here?"

Renny was in cat form, curled up against my thigh. She purred, rubbed her head against my knee and looked at me patiently from glowing brown eyes. I squeezed my eyes shut and groaned. Yes. Apparently Renny agreed with the men.

"Just because I don't like dumping my shit all over someone else's yard, that doesn't mean my shit is any more interesting or special than anybody else's shit," I said succinctly. "Bracken, what's the next goddamned problem."

"You are, beloved," Green interrupted evenly. "And your *shit* is special because it is *your shit* and you are important to us, and we don't want you to make a stupid mistake because you can't see your pretty yard for all the *shit* in your eyes."

Suddenly I felt tears start, and I couldn't seem to wish them back. I stood up abruptly. "I'm going to go knit with the vampires," I said grandly, and stalked

out of the room so they could worry about me without my personally being there to suffer through it.

There were no vampires in their common room. It was pissing down rain outside, which they hated as much as the living, and when I put out a gentle, mental "haloo..." to Marcus I got a rather confused image of red light and bare limbs and a bed so big it made mine look like a crib and I cut off that line of thought immediately. As quietly as possible, I slunk back into my room.

Green was waiting there for me, laptop engaged, fingers tapping implacably. When he saw me in the doorway, he looked up and smiled. "I like what you've done with the place, luv," he said, nodding at the magically redecorated walls. I had forgotten he hadn't seen my room since that odd and revealing afternoon with Bracken.

"Thanks," I murmured, and flopped into the overstuffed chair next to his. Apparently this conversation was as inevitable as moonrise. I might as well be comfortable.

"It actually gives me an idea of how to make our people invulnerable to Hollow Man, if you want to know the truth—but I need to make a trip back to Marin to make sure it will work."

"Good," I said numbly. Any news on that front that didn't involve us shouting at each other was good. "What would we have to do?"

"Mmm..." He tapped furiously for a moment, hit send, and finished his reply to me. "I'd sooner wait and see if it worked before I propose it to you, luv. It's not necessarily something high on your wish list, and we've got enough on your plate."

"Okay," I agreed, waiting. Tired of waiting. "What do you want me to say, Green?" I asked. My knitting bag was still looped around my elbow, and I found myself looking at my unusually still hands.

Green looked at me until I looked back, and his emerald eyes were intense and sober. I shifted uncomfortably for a moment, and then he started to speak and my entire world went as quiet as my hands. "I want you to say that you're beautiful, and magnificent, and that you deserve every good thing you've ever gotten. I want you to say that you don't need to earn our love—and that you'll honor the love we give you by not thinking ill of yourself for stupid human

preconceptions that you've disproved a thousand times over. I want you to say that you forgive yourself for making mistakes, for being one of the Goddesses' children and for not knowing every answer to every situation. I want you to say to yourself, if not to me and Bracken, that you are worthy." He stopped, and I hadn't been looking at him for a few sentences. Instead, I was staring at my still hands, and they were wet with tears, and I couldn't say anything at all.

"And if you can't say that, *ou'e'eir*" he continued, his own voice taut, "I want you to get rid of whatever is getting in your way. And if that means dumping your *shit* on someone else's lawn, that's what it means."

Oh gees. My shoulders shook for a moment, and I still couldn't meet his eyes. I nodded my head mutely, because that seemed to be the only answer I could give. Green got up and kissed my forehead. "I've got an appointment, beloved," he murmured. "I'll send Bracken in a couple of minutes, give you time to pull yourself together, okay?"

I nodded. Bracken came in fifteen minutes later, and I was still weeping soundlessly. He pulled my yarn bag out of my arms and slid my jeans down my hips, and then pulled me into bed and let me cry myself to sleep against him. And the whole time, I had no words, no words to give any of them, not one lousy curse or protest or syllable of agreement or disagreement, just tears. It was the damndest thing.

Nobody mentioned it the next day, and I was hoping everybody would just let it drop, but as Bracken and I neared Hallow's door and I saw Nicky, Mario, La Mark, Renny, *and* Officer Max sitting on the floor of the hallway, I realized that their silence on the matter was just more time to plot.

"Oh for fuck's sake..." I huffed when I spotted everybody.

"Cory..." Nicky said, his hands out, like he was soothing a dangerous animal.

"Cory *what?*" I demanded. "I wasn't planning on skipping out...it's a shrink appointment—what the hell is the honor guard for?"

"We're here to watch over Bracken," Max said evenly. Ever since he'd fallen for Renny instead of me, he had been the one person completely unafraid of my moods. Right now I despised him for it.

"Bracken and I see Hallow together," I answered with, I thought, excessive

reason.

"Not today," Bracken murmured, bending down so he could say it softly, and I turned around to glare at him. He looked implacably back, and I turned around to glare at the whole goddamned lot of them. They were calm, reasonable, and unassailable.

"There was no reason for a fucking ambush," I hissed, "What's it going to take to get you people off my back?"

"I don't know..." Renny said pleasantly, "How about Hallow walks you to the door and says 'Well, Cory, it's been a good session. I look forward to next week.'"

I frowned at her. "Does he ever actually do that?"

Everybody but Max nodded at me, and I blinked, feeling bad. I guess I was usually so busy escaping at maximum velocity I had missed out on that part.

"Fine!" I snapped, pulling out of my surprise and jerking my hand from Bracken's. He had been holding it gently, like you would an egg, since I'd seen everybody lying in wait like velociraptors. "In half an hour, that'll happen, and you all can get the hell off my back." And with that I opened Hallow's door, hitting it with my shoulder and flinging it back into wall with so much force that Hallow choked on the sandwich he was eating and even I jumped in surprise. That didn't keep me from slamming the door in everybody's face, though. Screw them all.

"Lady Cory..." Hallow choked. "Are you actually early?"

Jesus, I was. I would get them for this, I swear to the Goddess I would. "Look," I said ungraciously, not caring. "I've got an appointment to go running with a human in mortal peril in forty-five minutes. What's it going to take to get you to escort me to the door in a half an hour, saying we've made progress or some sort of crap like that, and that you actually look forward to seeing me next week."

Hallow blinked and choked back a smile. "I beg your pardon?"

"You heard me! Which part of my soul do I have to bare, which ventricle of my heart do I have to eat, what in the blue fuck do I have to say to get you to walk me to that door in twenty-nine minutes and say 'Well, Cory, this has been

very productive and I look forward to seeing you next week?"

"Is that a requirement of the session?" he asked, sounding confused.

"There are four of my ex-friends and two lovers who are going to be very sorry out there waiting to hear those words from your mouth, so I need to know what I have to do to make it happen." The anger that had born me up was far from fading, my voice was rising to a shrill shriek and just ask me if I gave a flying fuck.

Comprehension dawned on Hallow's face. "Oh," he murmured, "I take it Green and Bracken are getting impatient."

"Impatient? They're getting overbearing! I mention one lousy idea about how to get Hollow Man off our back and suddenly they think I have a death wish. Do they think I'm stupid? Do they think I'd risk Bracken's life? How about Nicky's life? What about Green's heart? Too goddamned much rests on my breathing in and out to just throw my life away—what do they think I'm going to do?"

"I don't know...what do they think you're going to do?" He was still confused, and I was still pissed off.

"All I said is that if I blooded this asshole like any other vampire he'd be bound to me, and then we could kill him, and they think I have a self-esteem problem."

"Well do you?" Hallow risked a nervous glance behind him at the clock and seemed reassured that only three minutes had passed.

"Would I know it if I had one?" I shot back. "And Renny—damn. The woman is cat more often than she's human and she thinks *I'm* the one with a problem? And Max! Max was so screwed up he actually thought he wanted me for like, eight months. Two weeks of screwing Renny like a lemming, and he's totally besotted and *I'm* the one who needs therapy. Nicky spends two weeks in a traveling orgy and *I'm* the one who needs some goddamned therapy? And what about Bracken? Asshole can't even admit there's a goddamned ghost in the goddamned garden because then he'd have to admit that he's still angry with that ghost and that would just fucking kill us all, then wouldn't it—and *I'm the one who needs some goddamned therapy!*" My voice damned near shattered the windows, and suddenly I was out of words and embarrassed by my anger in

front of this relative stranger and all of my impetus rushed out of me as the blood rushed to my face. I sat down abruptly.

"I beg your pardon, Master Hallow," I said quietly, the sudden silence so loud my swallow seemed to echo in it, "How are you today?"

He breathed out on a bemused laugh. "Well, I for one feel very relieved. Was all that catharsis good for you?"

Oh, Jesus—how loud had I been? "No," I said, embarrassed. "You don't think they heard, do you?"

"Not at all—they might have heard your voice raised, but I don't think they could make out the words," he said kindly.

"Magic shielding?" I asked inanely.

"No—hellifically old building," he nodded.

"Ah." I could actually hear the clock tick. "Do you mind if I knit?" I asked politely.

"Knock yourself out," he invited.

I pulled out my bag and situated myself in the deafening silence and then looked at Hallow expectantly. "So...any questions I can answer today, Professor Hallow?" I asked, feeling like I was eating my heart just to prompt the whole process that I had dreaded for a month.

"A few," he said firmly, as though he were ready to get down to business. "Would it matter?"

"Well, I thought questions were the point," I said, confused.

"I meant, would it matter if everybody heard what you said about them," he prompted, and I flushed.

"Yes," I said, shamed. "They rely on me. They *follow* me. Even..." I choked, because this truth was still painful. "Even Bracken. You don't...go off...on people who follow you."

Hallow nodded, and his look of perpetual worry deepened and I felt my stomach clench. This was totally going to suck. "You didn't say ex-lovers," he said, and it was such a non sequitur that now *I* was the one who was confused.

"I'm sorry?"

"You said 'ex-friends'—and as mad as you were, I knew you weren't serious. You didn't say 'ex-lovers.' Why not? It wouldn't have mattered—you were just 'going off as you said...you were going off in a totally safe place, with a totally safe person, and as upset as you were, you didn't say 'ex-lovers'. Can you tell me why?"

I shrugged. "My love is a matter of life and death—to both of them, in its way." I shrugged again, my flush intensifying. "You don't say shit like that when it's that important. Not even when you're mad. Not even when it's safe."

"Not even in your own head?" he prompted gently, and I was instantly horrified.

"Goddess, no!" I gasped, the pain of even the thought too awful to contemplate. "No. Not even to think about." I wanted to make him even take the idea back, as childish as I knew that to be.

He nodded again, and I was starting to dread the slow, thoughtful incline of that noble head. "You're awfully controlled for someone so young, Lady Cory."

He didn't miss my wince with the honorific, but he didn't say anything about it either. "You didn't even lose control when you lost control. Can you remember the last time you completely lost your cool about something?"

Oh, Jesus. It took me a minute to discipline my mouth and be sure my voice wouldn't betray me. "Of course I do," I said casually, working the cable needle deftly, knitting, knitting from the needle, knitting some more. "You couldn't have missed it. I was covered in Adrian's blood, I almost killed Bracken and Arturo and a hundred vampires died." I swallowed, proud of how good I was getting at saying that without completely losing it. "I don't want to let that happen ever again."

"Which part?" he asked, an emotion in his voice that I couldn't define. I looked sharply at him, and he went on. "The part where you lost your lover, or the part where you killed the people responsible?"

Oh, gees. I looked him in the eyes and shook my head. "You know, Master Hallow, this whole therapy thing is soooooo going to suck large," I said, so much feeling dripping from my voice that I was surprised it didn't melt the floor.

Hallow cocked his head sympathetically. "You own me fifteen more minutes, my lady," he said gently, and I thought with a shocking jolt of venom, that I could really hate this guy.

Fifteen minutes later, nothing had changed my mind. I felt like I had been put through the wringer, and my anger at my people hadn't dimmed one itty bitty little teeny tiny bit. Hallow walked me to the door, as promised, and put his gentle hand on my stiff shoulder. Then he spoke in a voice meant to carry, "It was good talking to you, Lady Cory." He gave a little bow as he said it, which made my mortification complete. "I look forward to talking to you next week."

I smiled at him pleasantly and murmured, sotto voice, "If you think I'm ripping my soul open like that for you next week, you're high."

"If you don't," he murmured, "I'm going to insist to Green that you take a full hour, at least twice a week." Then, louder, "So—same time next week?"

"If I don't eat your liver first." I smiled, and he smiled blandly back before gesturing Bracken inside his office. I glared at everyone left, and they all had the grace to look ashamed.

"I'm going running," I snapped. "If anyone tries to follow me, I'll fry them to the last grizzled pubic hair."

"Cory—it's not safe..." Nicky started, and I cut him off with a glare.

"Fuck you Nicky, and the posse you're riding on." And with that I shouldered my backpack and took off, not even bothering to look behind me because I was serious and I was pretty sure they were more afraid of me than they were of Bracken.

By the time Davy joined me on the track, I'd run a half a mile on sheer pissed-offedness. I'd run it too fast in the driving rain, and I was winded, sore, drenched, and irritated, but I was still angry so when Davy came up beside me I didn't slacken my speed.

"Wow, Cory—you're going pretty fast," she said, surprised, and I just nodded, knowing that talking was beyond me right now, "Any particular reason?"

"I want my husband to live." I puffed out, and Davy, being a smart young woman, nodded and said nothing else for the rest of the run. It turned out to be

pretty short, because in two more laps I had to slow down against my will, and we walked in silence for a half a mile before my breathing slowed and she asked me if I wanted to talk about it. I shook my head.

"I just got blackmailed into therapy," I said sourly, "Ask me if I want to talk about anything else today."

Davy barked out a laugh. "That's harsh. What did he use as blackmail?"

I sighed, and it came out as a shudder. "My running time," I said, still blowing a little. It was pounding down frigid cloud piss but between my temper and the run, I was overheated. Frustrated, I pulled off my sweatshirt and my white T-shirt, leaving me in my black sports-bra, walking face up in the cleansing rain. Davy stopped suddenly, her yellow rain poncho making a whisking sound.

"Wow!" she breathed. "Cory, that is one hell of a tattoo on your back, does it mean anything?"

I stopped, right there on the rubberized track. "Yes," I murmured through a suddenly rough throat, "It means a lot...but it's sort of hard to explain."

"Give it a try," she murmured, lost in the weaving of leaves and blood that was written on my back.

"They're symbols," I said lowly, "For people I love. It...it was sort of our way of binding ourselves to each other, so that...the world would know we belonged to each other."

"Which one is Bracken?" she asked.

"He's the sword with the red cap on it. And the blood," I shrugged, "It's sort of an ancestral thing for him."

"Who's the hawk?"

I shrugged again. "Nicky." She'd met him.

"But you two...you're like brother and sister..." she said puzzled.

"Yeah. We should be, but...but our world is complicated."

Davy laughed. "It's the same world I live in."

"It is," I answered, and a wave of discomfort and worry suddenly crashed into me and broke, "You just don't know it. Look...Davy..." And at that moment we both took a breath that we didn't finish.

"Holy crap, what is that stench..." she choked, and as quick as that we were wearing the shield I'd practiced two days before, and the fight with Hollow Man was on.

"Davy, we've got to get to Bracken and the others," I said breathlessly, calling silently for Green. "That smell is a bad thing, and we don't want to be here when it pounces."

I'd left my back pack in the locker room today, and I fleetingly mourned it as I grabbed Davy's hand and pulled her at a dead run towards the gate at the far side of the field from us. She was reluctant to go, and my shoulder twisted backwards as I jerked her body forward, and she finally took the hint and joined me. A hundred meters, I thought with fractured logic. We were both runners—we could make a hundred meters in a fairly brief amount of time.

And then something hit the shield with a ring like a marshmallow church bell, sending Davy and I flying in my cushioned bubble of power, bouncing off the ground like kids in one of those big inflatable play pens. And the smell...why couldn't my shields ward off the smell I thought dismally, but there was no time, no goddamned time to figure it out.

"What in the hell..." Davy pulled herself to her feet and I grabbed her hand and dragged her back into our full out run.

"Shut up and keep running," I panted, "And if I go down, go get Bracken."

"What's after..." And with that we were hit again. It was moving too fast to see, and it didn't shatter my shield, but the invisible wall did get weak on the bottom, and we both went down face first. My nose exploded in white pain and between that and the stench my stomach cramped, but it wasn't just me out here, it was Davy and me and I needed to get her to safety. Both of us came up wiping blood from our knees and our hands and mouths, but I was the one who bounded to my feet again and went lurching for the end of the field.

"Shit!" I spat, reinforcing my goddamned shield and taking up that dead run one more time. I'd done something serious to my face when we went down, and not only could I not clear the stars from my vision, but my first breath had

me choking on blood. Twenty-five meters, I thought, gasping from my mouth. We had twenty-five fucking meters and my mad was on.

Beloved... Green's voice was alarmed in my head. *Where is everybody?*

Funny story. Even my mental voice was winded. *I'll tell you about it some time. Could you send them this way?* With that I felt the whoosh of a body that was too unwieldy to move with the Goddess' speed and I turned towards it, my anger and my power smacking together with my furious backhanded gesture, and without warning a familiar, bulky sized human materialized, hurtling away from us and landing with a nasty melon-hitting-concrete sound, head first against the bleacher wall.

"Oh fuck," I murmured, sickened even as I turned and grabbed Davy's hand and once again resumed our sprint. I was going to have to barf sometime soon. The stench of Hollow Man hadn't diminished and I had to believe he had more to throw at us than poor Chuck Granger, whose blood and grey matter were currently being puddled on the track by the pissing rain. What a fucking waste.

There was one more whooshing attack of air and malice before we hit the gate and the split in the stadium but I backhanded it just like I'd backhanded Granger, and Green was in my head to give me some added power. I heard it crash and screech behind us in a mess that must have surely bent and twisted some of the bleachers, but I kept Davy's hand and kept running blindly, through the split, past the stadium and up towards the campus until I met an unmovable force of muscle, angst and panic that wrapped it's arms around me and murmured affectionate things like 'dumb shit' and 'fuck wit' into my hair until the shaking stopped.

"Jesus...Bracken where'd you come from?" Davy asked between spitting blood, and I remembered myself and my duty and my nose gushing blood and pulled away from Brack's furious, warm arms.

"Green called me," he said, and I nodded.

"I called him." Hugging Bracken had made even the scrapes on my hands and knees run blood, and suddenly I could taste it down my throat, clear and coppery as well. Not now, I begged, and tried to keep my composure even as I popped a cold sweat. I'd dropped my sweatshirt and T-shirt on the track in the initial run, and when I looked down for something to wipe myself on, all I saw was my Lycra sports bra and running shorts, plastered to my body in the

dripping rain.

Bracken swore and reached under his sweatshirt to rip his T-Shirt from his body and hand it to me, careful not to touch my skin again.

"Where're the boys?" I asked into the wadded T-shirt, my voice clogged and nasal. I nodded at Max and Renny as they came sprinting towards us.

"Gees, that's a big cat!" Davy breathed, and I shook my head. Max was holding various parts of Renny's clothing and looking pissed off—I was pretty sure he'd scooped those up behind her after she changed.

"You have no idea," I murmured, suddenly nauseous and cold and feeling foolish about being mad enough to leave all these people running to my rescue behind. "Nicky and everybody?" I prompted Bracken.

"Checking out the area." He was making helpless gestures like he wanted to touch me. "We were halfway here when they said the noise stopped...I assumed that since I was still..." His usually stoic face threatened to crumple, and his voice got thick, "That if you were okay, that meant that he had stopped the attack and left."

"I'm sorry," I said softly, meaning it.

"You should be," he snapped, and he looked so miserable that I reached out and touched his face, heedless of the recently slowed blood that went running down my face all over again.

"I was mad, Bracken—I'm sorry. I didn't expect an attack today...I just needed some space, that's all." My voice was getting thick and slurred as my nose swelled. Wonderful.

Suddenly three big birds touched down about ten feet from us, and checking to make sure that Davy was wrapped up with scratching a reluctant Renny behind the ears, they turned and approached us.

"There're two dead men in the bleachers," Nicky said quietly, for my ears only. "And I think we should get the hell out of here before anyone sees them and you two bleeding like an auto-wreck."

"In a second," I said, picturing again what Chuck Granger had looked like with his skull cracked open. I closed my eyes tightly, fighting nausea with

everything I was worth.

"Give it up and barf, baby," Bracken ordered gruffly. "Then we can get the hell out of here."

Good advice. I fell to my hands and knees and my shoulder sang in pain. That was good, because the extra pain made it easier to let go. I closed my eyes because I hadn't eaten lunch and I knew the rain would be washing away my own blood and some stomach acid that I didn't want to see, and heaved. Above me I could sense Bracken's restive movements—he wanted to touch me, to stroke my hair from my face, to comfort, and he couldn't. I finished and spat and used an offered corner of the bloodied T-shirt to wipe my mouth. Davy came over and fussed over me but I shook her off and took Nicky's proffered hand so he could heave me to my knees. Max came over and helped, giving me Renny's green hoodie to put on over my sports bra. It looked familiar, and I cast the big tawny cat rubbing up against Davy an exasperated look as I realized that it was mine. Renny the cat licked her whiskers and yawned, and I stuck my tongue out at her as I started to ease the sweatshirt on and tried to pull my thoughts together. Other things to worry about, I thought grumpily, but damn, it sure would be great if the stuff in my closet stayed mine. My shoulder protested loudly when I finally moved it, and I must have done something big to it when I was dragging Davy along behind me. Fucking fabulous.

"What about?" Max asked, looking at my friend meaningfully, and I sighed and rubbed my bloody hand across my bloody face and through my sopping hair.

"Davy..." I murmured, and she looked at me, her eyes shrewd and expectant even as she hugged Renny to her. "Davy—you need to go to Kyle's apartment and thtay...*stay* there. And you can't be alone."

"But Kyle's there," she said, sounding puzzled.

"Not weally," I replied slowly, shaking my head against her questions. "Not until thunthet...*sunset*, anyway. I'm going to send..." I looked over my shoulder at Max and he nodded. "Max and Renny and Mario with you."

"No," Mario said, unexpectedly, and I looked at him in surprise. "I'm your honor guard, Cory, like it or not. I'm not leaving you and homeboy here for the rest of the day."

"But... I...Max and Wenny can't be awone..." I said helplessly. All at once

this leadership thing seemed too large for me and I ruthlessly squashed that thought, but not before Green caught it. *Take it easy, beloved.* He murmured, and the smell of mustard flowers made me strong. "Okay—who *is* going with them?" I asked. "Howwow Man ith out there, and Kyle's going to be vewy pissed when he wakes up. I don't tink two of us are going to be enuff." My fucking nose hurt like the ass of the fucking lowest butt-reaming demon in the fucking pit of fucking hell. Talking was getting painful and unintelligible and I was starting to shiver and I wanted out of the goddamned rain almost as much as I wanted Green, but this had to be dealt with.

"I'll go," Nicky said unexpectedly, and I shot him a supremely grateful look and kissed his knuckles in thanks, and then I remembered our physics midterm.

Green? I asked helplessly, and was relieved when I didn't have to voice the weak-assed question.

I'll have Hallow take care of it. He murmured, and I nodded.

"Don't wowwy about physics," I said quietly to Mario and La Mark "Gween will deal."

"Oddly enough, the last thing on my mind," La Mark said dryly, and my blood spattered with my laugh.

"Oh gees..." I swore, feeling my nose starting to swell enough to bother my speech. "Is dere anyding we can do to top this goddabbed bweeding?"

Between Bracken's proximity and my broken nose (it must have been broken—with the hurt and the breathing and the goddamned blood there wasn't another option) it turned out that there really *wasn't* anything we could do about the bleeding. By the time we pulled up to Green's hill, I had soaked through what was left of Bracken's T-shirt as well as one of the sweatshirts Nicky had left in the SUV, and since those were the only extra clothes in the car, I was freezing my ass off as well. Somewhere between where we'd met by the stadium and the parking lot, my shoulder had good and well frozen up with agony, and the entire trip up the hill was one long misery of pain, blood, and cold.

Max had called right when we hit the freeway and told us that Davy had taken them to a little apartment near the school and that they were all drying off in the living room, pleasantly telling her that there was no need to wake Kyle up

and hoping she wouldn't press the issue. Nicky got on the phone and asked how long I'd had sprites watching her, because they had made themselves busy at Kyle's house and the place was spotless. I had him ask them what they could do about Davy's insistence on questions and he said he'd do what he could. He also told me that she had a split lip and that it had scabbed over by the time they got to the apartment. Lucky Davy.

Green was waiting for us as we pulled up, his yellow hair dark with rain and his lovely face clouded with worry. I had a sudden, horrible feeling in the pit of my stomach—I had done this to him, I thought miserably. I was the reason he was standing in the rain, pacing and afraid. Wonderful.

He greeted me with grim, flashing eyes, and a general pat down to check my injuries. I yelped as he touched my arm and he practically had to fight my hand away from my nose, soaked through T-shirt and all.

"I'b thorry," I garbled, trying not to cringe away from his touch in guilt and shoving that pathetic wad of bandage back up against my face. "I'm bweeding like a thucking thtuck boose."

Mario sputtered as he got out of the car. "Are you sure that's not a sticking mucked foose?" he asked, putting a gentle hand on my shoulder and shooting Green a wary look.

"With Cory's mouth I think she meant a mucking fucked stoose," La Mark shot back, aligning himself next to me and giving my 'gentle' beloved one of those super bright smiles that usually melts knees.

"I think," Green said deliberately, "That she is bleeding like a fucking stuck moose. And I also think that you two need to get out of the rain."

"We tried," Mario murmured, and then they deserted me like the cucking fowards they were, leaving me face to face with one very unhappy beloved, while the other one parked the car.

It was hard to look sheepish when you can't wrinkle your nose or show your mouth, and after a minute I found I was squinting uncomfortably against the rain as it fell. "Uhb...bewoved..." I said hesitantly, and he swore savagely and hauled me against him, mindful of the shoulder, but with the suppressed violence of a pulled bow-string.

"It would serve you right if I let you bleed," he said, and his voice was as

close to sounding petulant as a two-millennium old being possibly could.

"I 'd'ow," I said, and all of my misery must have oozed through the rag in front of my face, because he heaved a giant sigh, and kissed my temple reluctantly, but the sweet weirdness that was his healing felt just as wonderful when the tingle of knit tissues and re-aligned bones faded. Then he ushered me to the shower, and half an hour later I was no longer bleeding, my nose and shoulder no longer hurt, and I was warm and dry on his couch. But that awful feeling in my stomach was still there. It wasn't helped by the fact that both he and Bracken insisted I eat as soon as I got out of the shower, and the stew that Grace left simmering on the stove sat like a rock.

"So, beloved," he said after a moment, "You've told me about the attack, and about the two dead 'meat puppets' as you called them. You told me that you knew one of them from high school and that he probably gave the Hollow Man part of your name."

I nodded. I thought the name part might be crucial—knowing that much about me was probably what gave Hollow Man the power to sneak up on me. The more I'd thought about it in the car, the more I thought I should have known he was there before Davy did—certainly before he steered Chuck Granger into my shield.

"What you have yet to tell me, is what you were doing out on the track alone." His voice was still even, but I'd known him long enough—and I knew him well enough—to know that he was still boiling mad.

"It's..." My voice trailed off as Bracken glared at me from across the couch. His look was part misery, part anger, and part dread. He didn't want to tell this story to Green any more than I did.

"You said it was sort of a funny story, really."

I nodded, pursing my lips.

"I'm not laughing yet."

Ouch. "You sort of had to be there," I said numbly.

"Bracken?" Green looked at where he sat on the overstuffed chair, far away from me, and Bracken's miserable expression was more than I could stand.

"It's not his fault!" I cut in, embarrassed. "It's mine...he was with Hallow, and I went hauling off for the track."

"Why?" Green asked pointedly, "And if he was with Hallow, why didn't anybody else come with you?"

"Please—beloved...it's sort of between me and..." I trailed off because the look on his face said his patience was thinning and that 'between them and me' thing wasn't going to fly. "I told them to go piss up a rope, okay?" I blurted. "I finished my...my *thing* with Hallow and told them to fuck off and that if they followed me I'd fry them all. They...they just did what I said, that's all."

Green looked at Bracken and he returned the look with so much self-directed anger that I couldn't stand it. "Don't let him do that, Green," I begged, feeling tears threaten for the first time since we'd gotten home, "I waited until he was in Hallow's office so he wouldn't make a big thing about it. I was angry and I went haring off into the wild blue and bad shit happened..." My mouth quirked upwards, in spite of the heaviness of my heart. "I know you know the feeling."

Green shook his head in disgust, and he flopped down on the couch next to me. "Yes, luv, I know the feeling," he murmured, taking my hand in his and rubbing his thumb over my knuckles.

"Bracken?" I murmured, holding my free hand out to him. He looked away from me and a string in my heart popped. "Please, Bracken, please?" I begged, and he closed his eyes and even before he heaved himself out of the chair and plopped next to me, I knew I'd won.

"Well, Corinne Carol-Anne," Green murmured into my hair even as I brought Bracken's knuckles to my lips, "I do hope you at least got something out of your session with Hallow today."

"I don't want to talk about it."

"I know you don't," he said dryly, and even Bracken laughed. "Can you at least tell me why it's so hard to talk to someone else?"

I was going to say no. But I'd just put my life in danger, and by proxy, Bracken's, as well as Davy's and the lives of every body else who had run to my rescue, and maybe my own sense of privacy needed to be invaded. "Can you tell me why it's so important that I do?" I asked, surprising even myself. "Why can't I just talk to you and Bracken and people here? You're all...smart and wise and

shit...why can't it just be you?"

"Because you can't even say what you're really thinking to us," Bracken spoke up unexpectedly, "You...cloud it, with language and with this thing you do where you're trying not to sound 'smart and wise and shit' and I'm not sure if you're worried that you'll sound like something you're not or more worried that the world will see that you're something you are, but you don't talk to us."

I blinked, and so did Green.

"And look who is all 'smart and wise and shit'," Green said wryly. I leaned back into Green and he put his arm around my shoulder, which wouldn't ache anymore. Bracken leaned back into me and I stroked his hair.

"See?" I said brightly. "I don't need anyone but you."

"Yes you do," Bracken said soberly. My fingers stilled in his hair. "Because Green will let you get away with that. And so will I. Because we love you and we don't want to watch you hurt. But Hallow won't. Hallow won't let you get away with lying to yourself or lying to him. And that's why you need to talk to someone not us."

There were so many things I could have said to that. I could have said, 'Fine, Bracken, you go have a conversation with Adrian, I'll talk to Hallow.' I could have told Green, 'You tell me about the other things in your life that hurt more than Adrian's death, and I'll go talk to Hallow.' Hell, if nothing else, I could have begged and pleaded and wept, and I don't think they could have denied me. But...

"I'm not good enough for either of you," I said softly, "If this is all you ask of me, then I can't say no."

"If this is what it takes for you not to believe that," Green murmured, "Then this is what we're asking of you."

"Okay," I murmured, sinking into the comfort sandwich that the two of them made. "Okay."

GREEN

Exploring Options

Green managed to spell her to sleep before Kyle got there. He didn't feel particularly bad about it either, because when she was strong and happy her will was too strong for him to influence like that. But when she was stressed, or recharging her batteries after something like today's attack, all it took was comfort and relaxation, and then the suggestion of sleep would have her soft and warm and breathing quietly in his arms like a child. The aptness of the analogy was not lost on him, either.

"Do you want me to take her?" Bracken asked, as soon as he felt hands slacken in his hair and fall to her sides.

"Not really, but it would probably be best. Davy's boyfriend is going to be storming in here about ten minutes after sunset, and it would be good to have the both of you quietly locked away, I think."

"She'll hate the thought of hiding," Bracken stated dryly, sitting up and swinging around to pick Cory up.

"Well, she won't be hiding, will she? She'll be sleeping, sexing, or studying, right?"

Bracken nodded, raised an eyebrow, said: "I'm all for option B."

Green laughed and shifted her off of his lap. "You're all talk, mate. You were so relieved to have someone take up the slack it almost had you walking funny."

And now it was Bracken's turn to laugh as he hoisted their beloved in his arms. "Yeah yeah—and you were pretty happy to do just that. But seriously—how are you going to deal with Kyle? He's going to be pissed."

And Green's expression hardened. "Well now, he's not the only one to have something to be pissed about, is he?"

Bracken sobered. "No. He's not." His voice turned inward, and Green took his cue.

"I promised her I wouldn't let you do that. Today wasn't your fault, Bracken."

"I should have..."

"Should have what? Known? Stopped her? We love her because she's strong willed. You think we're going to be able to tell her what to do all the time because we wish it?" Cory had this argument with Bracken this winter, he knew, but some things needed to be said twice. "Then she wouldn't be who we love, right?"

Bracken nodded. "Right." He shook his head, as though pushing the lesson in. "Right," he repeated, and set off for their room.

A few minutes later, Nicky called to tell them that Kyle was on his way—and that he wasn't driving. In the ten minutes that followed, Green managed to surround himself with Arturo, Mario, Eric, Joe, Steph, Ray, Leah, Willow, Sweet, Twilight, Cockleburrr, Grace, Marcus, Phillip, and Chet. Cory had offered Kyle a place with their people; vampires were communal creatures—they depended upon each other for society, sex, and blood. Green wanted Davy's beloved to have an inkling as to what Cory's offer truly entailed.

Sweet opened the door to Kyle's frenzied pounding, and greeted the furious vampire with a serene smile and a gesture into the front room. Green looked up calmly from his station on the stuffed chair, and invited Kyle to sit down on the couch. Kyle, thrown off his guard by the courtesy and the warmth of the greetings, accepted the place on the couch with little grace, and grunted a churlish negative to Leah's offered throat.

"You people need to stop offering me food." he snarled, frowning at Green. He was still wet from flying, and his hunting face with the deepened grooves and elongated jaw was barely receding. "That little were-kitten sitting with Davy right now could have lost her gullet."

"Since her boyfriend is a cop and probably packing the silver bullets we gave him for Christmas, I seriously doubt that," Green said smoothly.

Kyle blinked. "A what?"

"A human policeman on our local force." Green found that his smile had all teeth. "He's been...exceedingly useful...in recent months."

"You people..." Kyle shook his head and tried valiantly to remember his former anger. "My girlfriend is *bleeding*... her lip is split because of..."

"Because of an enemy we had nothing to do with," Green interrupted.

"Her lip is split open!"

"That's too bad. My beloved had a broken nose and a dislocated shoulder from the same incident. I'd say you got off easy on the worry department, didn't you mate?" And Green's voice hardened and his eyes grew flinty, and now every bit of his frustration with this vampire and with Cory's situation with his human began to roll off his bow-tight body in waves.

Kyle swallowed in surprise—a truly convulsive movement in a vampire. "Dislocated shoulder?" he asked blankly.

"From hauling Davy behind her, I believe," Green snapped. "Something she wouldn't have had to do if Davy had known what kind of danger she faces just being attached to you!"

"I can take care of my beloved!" Kyle snapped, but there was desperation in his voice. He didn't believe it, and neither did anyone else in the room.

"What are you afraid of?" Grace asked suddenly in exasperation. "If she's worth your love, she's certainly not going to turn you away because of what you are...you could at least tell her the truth."

"Yes," Green added unequivocally. "And you could at the very least protect her by finding a kiss to keep you well. If not us, then at least Andres!"

"Oh yeah—a kiss is a wonderful idea," Kyle snapped out sarcastically, "Because I want to see the woman I love passed around from vampire to vampire like a flask of whiskey at a campout."

There was a sudden shocked silence among Green's people, which Leah broke with her trademark humor. "Oh—are we doing that sort of thing now? Because Officer Max is totally hot. I've wanted him since he started coming by last summer!"

Eric looked at her consideringly. "You think? I don't see it."

"Oh yes," Willow nodded, pale gray-green face dreamy with hunger, "I'd have him. Of course Renny would chew my spine off while I slept," she added,

her eyes twinkling.

"Yeah, Green," Sweet said impishly, "If we're passing around lovers, I'll take either one of them—Cory or Bracken!"

"I get Cory first!" This from Marcus. "Phillip and I have had a thing for her since Adrian brought her home."

"Mmmm...more you than me, roomie," Phillip disagreed. "For me, it would be too much like kissing my sister."

"Not that that's a bad thing for the fey," Arturo said, flashing the silver caps he'd put on his teeth just for style, "But since I haven't kissed her either way, I wouldn't know."

"A thing that makes us all much more comfortable with each other," Grace added crisply.

Kyle was human enough—and shamed enough—to flush. "Okay," he said lowly. "I get it...I was wrong about that." He didn't say anything more, and the chatter around Green died down.

"I think," Green murmured, eyeing his people with meaning, "that young Kyle and I need to go walking in the rain for a bit."

Green liked taking newcomers to the Goddess grove. He liked their surprise, he liked their appreciation, and he liked reliving the memory of making it and his first wonder at what he had helped to shape. Kyle looked around at the trees in their erotic poses and swallowed again. The rain was dripping from the branches, singing on the moss on the ground, whispering to them of silent bodies, hushing skin and promises in the dark.

"Who are they?" he asked, voice rough. "They must be...there's something very personal about this. Like the wood had no other choice than to twist itself into their shapes."

"It *was* personal," Green replied simply. There was more rainy silence as Kyle digested this. Green allowed a certain amount of ambient light, and the two of them were standing at the bole of the oak tree Nicky had perched in a few nights before, staring into the low-lit grove, and the leaves of all the trees were dark and shiny from the wet.

"I'm glad," Kyle murmured. "It's beautiful when it's personal."

"Mmmm," Green agreed, then, delicately, "Crispin would have made you share her, wouldn't he."

Kyle bit his lip, and Green, looking at him sideways, could see that his fangs had extended, just a little, in agitation. "Yes." The young vampire said softly.

"Mmmm. We're not Crispin. If you don't choose us, you need to go to Andres." He was brusque, now, trying to give Kyle space and, more importantly, trying not to overlay his own strong personality on the vampire's connection with the hill. It was important that he looked to Cory more than Green.

"I've made a reservation at that hotel..." Kyle said hesitantly. "I'm going to see Andres this weekend."

Green nodded. "You need to leave tonight. Cory killed two humans controlled by the Hollow Man today—there are going to be questions and policemen and Davy can give more of us away with her ignorance than she would with her knowledge."

Kyle shook away his shock. "Yeah—okay. I spelled her to sleep as soon as she told me the story. We'll be packed and on the road before she wakes up."

"Good. Come back with your decision made. You put my beloved in danger with Davy's ignorance and that isn't going to happen again."

Green had a mildly autocratic streak, (Cory would have used a different adverb) and its timbre in his voice put Kyle's back up. "And what are you going to do if I don't?" he snapped.

"Oh that's easy. My people will hold you down while Cory bloods you, that's what we'll do." He turned to the young man with his eyes flat and his lovely, sensual mouth pursed and grim. "Don't test us on this, Kyle. For everybody's safety you need to resolve this situation now."

Kyle nodded, and managed a weak grin. "That's...really sort of merciful and terrifying at once, do you know that?"

"Well so is my beloved," Green replied, letting his own fond grin sneak out, "Terrifying, I mean. I'm the merciful one. You won't deal with me again."

"Why am I now?" Open curiosity.

Green let out a breath and decided to be brutally honest with the young vampire. They did, after all, have a few things in common. "Because I can be an autocratic bastard sometimes—if you want Cory's answer to it. But mostly because she came home today covered in blood and freezing cold and soaked in guilt. And you and I both know it wasn't her fault. Sometimes we do for our beloved what we can't do for ourselves." He looked at Kyle meaningfully, and finally, finally, he made eye contact.

"I hear you," he murmured, "I'll tell Davy, at the very least. I promise."

"See that you do." Green gestured towards the trap door inside. "And now I think it's time that you sent my people home and got on the road. Agreed?"

"Absolutely."

Cory emerged from her room about an hour later, yawning and with Bracken at her back, holding a physics text and what Cory called her 'back up' knitting bag. Study time.

"Why didn't anybody wake me?" she asked through her yawn. "I'm expecting Kyle any minute."

"He's actually come and gone," said Green casually, waiting.

Her eyes snapped open, and she spoke with careful emphasis. "Where, exactly, is he going?"

"To the hotel in the city." He looked up from his computer, and saw that Bracken was edging away skittishly, as though from a rabid dog.

Her eyes narrowed. "Dammit Green..."

"Corinne Carol-Anne!" He said abruptly, stilling her with her full name which he knew she missed the sound of since they had decided to use it sparingly. "Three days ago, I was asleep and Bracken knocked on the door...do you remember that?"

She blinked, surprised. "Y...yes..."

"What did you say to him when he was there?"

She shrugged. "I don't know...to take Max to school to keep an eye on

Nicky since Renny wasn't going..."

"Mmm-hmmm...why didn't you wake me up?"

She shrugged. "You were sleeping, Green...it was just standard stuff—I thought I'd spare you. You were so tired..."

He waited. She was stubborn, but by no means stupid.

Comprehension dawned. "But Green, this wasn't the same thing at all...I'm supposed to be the Queen of the vampires...what I did the other day was minor shit...this was big deal Queenship stuff..."

"And you are still learning to be queen," he said gently. "Nobody expected you to suddenly take over the reins overnight, luv. Let me do for you when I can. Please?" he added when she would have protested. "I will be gone enough, and it will be hard enough to just desert you and go—let me do these things for you when I can." He heard the note of pleading in his own voice and tried not to cringe.

Abruptly she closed the distance to the couch and threw her arms around him and buried her face in his neck. "No problem," she murmured. "No problem at all."

Bracken sat down in the overstuffed chair and opened the physics text, but she stayed buried in Green's arms for many more minutes before they got to studying. Later that night, Cory stretched, yawned, and moved herself off to bed, turning at the doorway expectantly. Bracken looked at Green, and Green smiled and nodded. "Of course, beloved," he said gently, "Go get ready and I'll be there in a moment."

She nodded in a sleepy, contented way that said their time together would be more snuggling than sex, and then wandered off to his bedroom. Bracken picked up the physics book and turned towards the hallway when Green caught his attention.

"The sylph's mating cycle is coming round again," he said softly, not wanting Cory to hear.

"I figured," Bracken frowned, "I didn't think you needed to be there for all of them."

"I don't—maybe one out of four, if they're as tight together as I think they are. But..." Green took a breath. He hadn't let *anyone* in on his plan to protect his people, but Bracken was crucial to what needed to be done, and to keeping Cory balanced enough to do what needed to be done. "I want to try something, with this cycle. This is going to be a trial run, but when the real thing comes around, I'm going to need you and Nicky to know what's coming."

"Have you told Cory yet?" Bracken was obviously non-plussed. Of the two of them, Green was the one she talked to easiest.

"No...She's having such a hard time finding balance...with all of us...what I'm thinking about doing will involve the four of us, and unless it works with the sylphs I don't want her to know the specifics..." Oh, Goddess, was he actually blushing? 1800 years old, and he couldn't discuss how to cast a spell in sex without blushing? God, Goddess and other, what was the use of living so long!

A slow grin had bloomed on Bracken's unrepentantly beautiful cheeks. "We're going to try to do that thing again...the one we did when you healed Twilight and we blew each other's minds."

"Among other things getting blown, yes," Green said dryly, pulling his composure back around him like a cobweb cloak. "But this is only a test run...I was just thinking that..."

Now Bracken looked positively eager, and Green had to laugh. He was sure to his bones that Bracken would be happy to bed Cory and Cory alone until his dying day. But he'd also been raised a sidhe, with all of the freedom that entailed—a little adventure wouldn't bother him at all. "You were thinking that if it was powerful when we were all apart, it would be absolutely nuclear if we were all in the same bed." His voice was practically throbbing with excitement.

"I think it could be protection against what the Hollow Man does against our blood, yes," Green affirmed. He outlined it, discussing the sexual logistics and the magic, and Bracken followed, his grin growing wider by the moment.

"That would be soooooo awesome," he said when Green was done, using some of Cory's own language. Then, as though remembering who they were talking about, he added, "She'll never agree to it."

"She might, when she sees how this one works." Goddess he hoped so, he

thought wretchedly. The only way to go through with this plan was to go through with it consensually. If she wouldn't agree—and wholeheartedly, without being dragged into it kicking and screaming—then it couldn't be done.

Bracken nodded, and Green could see he was hopeful. "Well, the least we can do is try," he murmured, and Green nodded in agreement. Bracken moved off to his bedroom again, because Cory was either getting impatient for Green or fast asleep. He turned at the doorway. "Green—that other thing aside, when the mating cycle kicks in, even if you're only going to be gone for one or two nights...leader, you have to tell her you're going before you leave. She's not ready for you to be gone yet—not so soon."

"I hear you," Green murmured.

"You'd better," Bracken laughed, but not happily, "Otherwise we'll both be hearing it from her."

"And she needs you to put her back together," Green said bleakly.

"It's what we do." And with that bit of philosophy he was off to bed.

CORY

The Physics of Breakthroughs

For most of the next three days, I worked at Grace's store, studied like mad, and enjoyed Green's company while he was home. He had another trip coming up soon, but he wouldn't commit to when—something to do with the mating cycle of the sylphs, but he wouldn't say anything more.

But tonight, Sunday, Green was down in Old-town Sacramento, having dinner with Eric and Hallow someplace obscenely expensive that I'd be uncomfortable in anyway, and since I'd made it my unofficial policy to see Hallow only during those times when I was required to tear open my intestines and show him what was wound where, it was better that I stay at home. As I was brushing Green's hair (I loved doing that—it was like playing with raw satin) Bracken stuck his head in the room and asked if I wanted to come with him to the Camp Far West property, where he was going to help the Avians with some big cave-man house-fixing ritual. They also needed a little bit of everyday magic, and I could help as well. After only the slightest hesitation, I said yes.

I actually liked traveling the back roads of the lower foothills this time of year. It had been raining pretty steadily for the last month, and now, nearing March, the small farm patches in Ophir were green with long grasses that would be weed-whacker fodder come fire season but were the closest thing many folks had to a lawn right now. I liked the smell of the usually dry earth, wet and happy, and the peeping wild-flowers in their too short season. Around the middle of March the whole drive would be crazy with lupins and poppies and those purple flowered things that turned into spiral sticker-burrs in the summer but were really pretty now. In the summer the place would be brown and lonely-feeling, in spite of the closeness of the properties and the oak trees that huddled the area together, but now, in the rain, it felt vast and social. It's too bad that spring time in the foothills is usually the week between when the rains stop and the thermometer climbs to the nineties as a prelude to settling into its nice comfortable niche around 102.

But the Avian property isn't in Ophir—it's out by Sheraton—if you skip over the freeway to Luther, you can cross Hwy. 49 and travel the back roads to Hwy. 193. From there it's a right turn on McCourtney, which winds peculiarly among big farmsteads before it starts doing some really stomach-turning things. First it snakes through this wildlife preservation place that nobody knows about, where Green just bought some mine-shaft riddled property for the cave trolls. Beyond that is a levee, with the man-made lake on one side and a pit of rocks on the other that has always terrified me because there's not even a faint guard rail on either side, and the bridge is one way. Between the kinky-snake things that the road did around the wildlife preserve and the rip-your-guts-open-on-the-rocks thing, the second half of the trip was not nearly as pleasant as the first part.

Bracken knew this, and made an effort to fill the moments between motion-nausea by the wildlife preserve and stark terror by the levee with easy conversation. Except conversation with Bracken was never as easy as it should be.

"How in the name of the three-headed one did you pass that test?" he asked for the umpteenth time.

"I told you." I was glaring straight ahead on this part of the road. If I wasn't careful, I'd get (surprise!) sick. "I just explained how I'd solve the problem as a moron who can't do math."

He pulled his lead-foot up a notch as we came out of the turn but the

centrifugal force still pushed me to the side of the car. "Give me an example, Cory—for sweet Goddess' sake, I've been trying to talk you through this for two months, give me a clue so I know how to help you for the rest of the semester."

My stomach rebelled and I tried desperately to hold on to the lunch he'd forced me to eat before we left the hill. It wasn't going to happen, but I tried by concentrating on physics anyway. "You want a clue? Fine. There's a goddamned car traveling on a goddamned curve. The car's initial vector is its weight times its speed going fucking forward. The idiot behind the...(oomph) fucking wheel took the goddamned curve at sixty-fucking-miles an hour which is a vector going thirty or so miles to the (bleagh) right and another vector going thirty or so miles forward so that if the goddamned wheels break loose and we go speeding off the damned hill we will have so much momentum taking us good and forward so we will jump off the twenty foot drop and so much momentum taking us to the side so we can slam into the trees before we have the gravity vector slamming us down off of that drop and into the ground when we die." I took a breath. It didn't help. "Pull over asshole, I have to hurl."

He held my hair back as I lost my dinner on the non-existent shoulder, but when I was done and ready to get back in the car, I could sense his suppressed laughter. I couldn't blame him, really.

"I don't think I used to do this quite so much," I mumbled after I'd rinsed and spat from a bottle of water we kept in the SUV.

"Define 'quite so much'." He put both hands under my arms and lifted me up like a rag doll, then kept his arm around my shoulders.

I scrubbed my face with my hand. "I mean, before last summer the last time I'd gotten sick to my stomach was probably when I fell off my friend's horse in the sixth grade and broke my wrist. I meet you and I can't seem to keep anything down."

"As flattering as that is to my ego, I could point out that you met Adrian and Green first," he said, stowing me securely in the car and closing the door.

"Yes, but I only seem to throw up around you," I pointed out sourly as he got in and started the engine.

Bracken turned to me and grinned so brightly that the dimples I hardly ever see popped in and I started to feel marginally better. "Maybe it's the price I

pay for bringing out the best in you as well.”

I laughed in spite of myself. "Shut up and drive the fucking car," I said, but my foul mood was ebbing and so was my nausea, and the humor might be enough for me to cope with the terror of the one-lane bridge.

"Car's not getting any action tonight, baby. Green's SUV is in the city and unlike Green, that monster doesn't share.”

I laughed a little more. "I'm serious, Bracken. I mean, I've always gotten car sick, but it wasn't always a guaranteed upchuck. Everybody gets queasy when they get hurt—but it's getting to the point where if I'm not throwing up, you guys know I'm fine.”

Bracken nodded. "Yeah, I know—Green and I were talking about it the other night.”

"You guys talk about me?" The idea was foreign, but it shouldn't have been. As much as I tried not to discuss either of them in front of the other one, sometimes it was just a by-product of shared acquaintanceship—it should have occurred to me that they would discuss *me* when I wasn't there. I just didn't think I was that interesting.

Another nod, this one exaggerated. "Yes, Cory. We discuss the care and feeding of Corinne Carol-Anne so that one of us might not step where the other of us just shit. Is that okay with you?”

I shrugged. "I guess I didn't think I was that high maintenance." Before he could say anything about *that*, I hurried up with, "So what about Cory-the-vomit-comet. What did you two come up with?”

He was *dying* to say something about 'high maintenance', I could tell, but he restrained himself. "It's sort of like an exhaust valve for your power. Your magic is fueled by emotions. When you get hurt—physically or emotionally—or when your sense of perspective gets confused you purge your human fuel. You fill up on magic, you dump your humanity—it's sort of a counterpoint.”

"That would be almost poetic, considering the subject matter," I said thoughtfully, "I just wish I could sweat blood or something less disgusting.”

Bracken laughed, and I realized that we had actually finished the kinky-snake part of the road and were at the one-lane bridge. He could be a handy guy

to have around sometimes. "Yeah—but this way all I have to do is hold your head. The other way it would be an all over sponge bath, and that could be inconvenient at times."

And we were over the bridge and to the property. Forget everything bad I've ever thought about Bracken's ability to make conversation—when it counted, he was freaking brilliant. And since I wasn't sweating blood, the sponge bath didn't sound like a bad idea either.

It wasn't until later that I realized the most important thing about that conversation. Without prompting, without bitterness, without anger or pain, Bracken used Adrian's name. At the time, I thought it was what Hallow would have called a breakthrough. It wasn't until later that I learned what a real breakthrough was all about.

When we got to the house, I was impressed by how much everybody—avians, vamps, weres, and sidhe—had accomplished. It had started out as a one story ranch-style house with four bedrooms. Now, thanks in part to some brilliant architecture by Green, a little magic and a lot of hard work, it was two stories, three if you count the basement darkling under construction—with fifteen bedrooms and six baths, not including the darkling. It wasn't fancy—nothing that would draw the attention of *Better Homes & Gardens*, but the middle rooms in the top story had clear fiberglass ceilings and ladders to the roof, with clear fiberglass posts that (with a little glamour thrown in) were difficult to see, but easy for man-sized birds to perch on. It was, in fact, an aerie—and the thirty or so displaced Avians that had put in their lot with Green and I after their old leader was overthrown would be very comfortable here.

They were glad to see me and Bracken—if they didn't get periodic visits from the sidhe themselves (or me) Green's glamour tended to fade—but mostly, the bird shape-shifters were just happy of company. Green had set them up here because he didn't want what happened to Nicky to happen to all of the other Avians—the atmosphere at the hill was so sexually charged that he was afraid more accidental bondings would happen without some distance. But that didn't mean that most of them hadn't come to like us. Besides, they all knew La Mark and Mario who were living at the hill now, and if we didn't bring them, we usually brought gossip.

Tonight, the gossip was grim. Nicky, who had come up earlier on his motorcycle (just ask me what the thought of a motorcycle on that road did to me)

was surfing the net on the house PC, and when we walked in he looked at us accusingly. "You guys are late—I almost called Green."

I grimaced. "Sorry, Nick. We had to take an upchuck detour."

It was his turn to wince. "Eww." Then, seriously, "Have you *seen* the press those two bodies are getting? They're going to open the track tomorrow, but I'll be surprised if you and Davy don't get questioned blue."

I sighed, and Bracken gripped my arm before moving to where the other Avians were working. They were laying drywall in the darkling tonight—the cave trolls had lined it with granite to help keep the foundation sound, but not even vampires wanted to live in a giant granite box.

"We have to go tomorrow," I murmured. "If I don't go running, Davy will want to know why, and if Kyle hasn't told her anything, I need to run damage control." Then, reluctantly because I didn't want to know, "Have they released the name of the other body?"

Nicky shook his head, looking studiously at the screen. He was lying.

"Give it up, Nick." I tried to sound sharp, but it was a nice gesture on his part. "I just want to know, okay?"

"Yeah. I know. His name was Shane Ruskaff."

"Jesus," I breathed out.

"He went to your high school."

"Yeah. He and Chuck used to hang out together...get high, get laid..." Make fun of punk Goth chicks like me and honors students like Renny and beat the hell out of runaways like Mitch and Ray who had been too poor and too dispossessed to turn to any outside authority for help. And wait down by the lake at night, for the vampires to come and roll their minds, so they could be free and pretend they didn't remember.

"It wasn't your fault," he said, and I'd heard it all weekend from Green and Bracken. Bracken, of course, blamed himself. Although unwilling to say anything, and certainly not willing to rub it in when Bracken felt so awful about the whole thing anyway, I think Green blamed him just a little bit too.

"Yeah," I said brusquely, "Can I climb to the aerie now? Last time I

couldn't and I had to redo the glamour from down here. That's why I think it died so early—I'm not that good with glamour yet."

"Cory, I mean it," Nicky said seriously, and I didn't want to have this conversation with him. I'd been having it for three days; there was nothing he could add to it, and telling him that would just make him feel like crap.

"I know you do. Thanks. The aerie?" I smiled brightly and looked expectant, and Nicky glowered at me.

"You've been driving them crazy, haven't you?" He wasn't moving towards the aerie. He was, in fact, standing nose to nose with me, so close and so intensely that I could see the black specks in his golden eyes. I didn't want to look him in the eyes, but he was only a little taller than I was so my next choice was his button-up shirt with the cityscape on it. Nicky loved trendy.

"I always drive them crazy." I checked out his shirt, staring at the single place where orange became yellow. I double-checked my face, and found my smile was intact. "C'mon—I think Bracken's going to be working in hyper-speed, and I may have some time to do my homework when this is finished."

"Dammit...Cory—you were defending yourself. You were defending *her*. You could have been killed..."

"So yes," I snapped, wanting this over with. "Yes, you're right, I had the right to smack them out of the sky like really big psychotic bugs running on magical steroids. I get it. I've heard it. They weren't nice people. I know that too. And, hey, the fact that I knew them and loathed them in high school was strictly incidental—and it's not like I haven't committed mass murder before." I swallowed, because my voice had gotten loud and I was aware that several of the men (there were very few female Avians in the world in general) were looking at me sympathetically.

"Well," he snapped back, clearly out of patience with me too, "Have you just gone and thought about the fact that maybe, considering what we know about how the guys addicted to Hollow Man end up anyway, that the way they ended up was a fucking mercy!"

I caught my breath, because in spite of all the cajoling Green and Bracken had done this weekend, that subject had not come up. "No," I grated, "I hadn't thought about that." And I didn't want to. I squeezed my eyes shut tightly,

adjusted my expression, and tried again. "The aerie, Nicky? Please?"

He grabbed my hand and practically hauled me to the middle of the house and up the ladder to the roof and stood there watching me do my job with crossed arms and a twisted expression. Buffing up the glamour was no problem — in fact, it was fun—and afterwards I sat on one of the fiberglass benches and stared into the star-laden sky. Sacramento was many miles and a few foothills to the South, and Woodland was barely a smudge off to the East somewhere, so the stars out here under all of the rolling bare hills that made this country were all our own.

"Pretty sky..." I said, feeling relaxed for a moment, "Sometimes I'm jealous of the guys out here, with all this sky to fly under."

"Do you want me to move out here?" Nicky asked tightly, and I looked at him in surprise.

"No!" I said, feeling a little panic. No. "I like you at the hill. You're...you're..." How could I finish that sentence? "No," I said at last, forlornly. "Look, Nicky, I know I yelled at you guys the other day, but...but..."

"This isn't about that," he said softly, coming up behind me. It wasn't raining but it was cold, and I felt his hands cup my shoulders tentatively, then move more firmly to wrap around my body and keep me warm. He had a smell, I realized with surprise. How is it that we'd had sex, not once but twice, and I hadn't noticed his smell? It wasn't mustard flowers like Green, or sun-on-stone, like Bracken—it was subtler, less overbearing. It was dusty and animal, like a dog or a cat that had been outside all day. Dusty feathers? Something. Something comforting. The comfort that was his smell made me suddenly frantic to keep him nearby.

"Then why would you want to move out?" I had been all ready to defend myself with the whole 'how are you holding up' thing, but Nicky leaving the hill had me nearly in tears.

"I don't," he said, and, Goddess help me, I leaned into him. In all our time together I never wanted to lead Nicky on, ever, but dammit, I didn't care that he had other lovers, I needed him as a friend. "I've been trying to think about how to...how to make this whole thing easier on you...I thought that..."

"Then don't even talk about it," I snapped, looking out into the smoke

colored hill shadows and the silver grasses of moonlit horse country. "It's not..." My voice rose, and I tried to find a word to describe how it would feel to know that Nicky wasn't down the hall, ready to talk to or study with or to step in and help in unexpected ways. "It wouldn't make it easier on me. It's not convenient," I finished weakly, and he laughed a little in my ear.

"Convenient?" he goaded.

"Just don't move," I begged at last, "Green and I like having you at the hill."

"Sure, Lady Cory," he said gently, and I had the feeling that he was laughing at me, but I didn't care. Nicky was staying. "As you wish."

"I wish you to be happy," I said softly, feeling wretched. "I want you to be happy, and I want you nearby. Is that awful? Am I being horrible and possessive? I don't care who else you love, Nicky...I...I've just come to depend on you, that's all."

"What makes me happy is being there for you," he said seriously, and I nodded, accepting his embrace as gratefully as I've accepted anything from Nicky since he brought me coffee during an all night study session in San Francisco.

I kissed his hands, linked in front of my chest. "I'm grateful for you Nicky," I said under the clear cold sky.

"You're welcome," he murmured, and I nodded. Far away near the flat black of the lake, a hawk that wasn't a hawk wheeled under the moon and went diving for some poor, sleepy fish who wasn't expecting non-birds that flew in the night.

"Is Tim really going to eat that fish?" I asked, thinking ick thoughts.

"No," Nicky laughed, "He just likes catching the damn things." We laughed a little together, but we didn't move for a long time. I was grateful, I thought breathlessly under the moon, still scenting sun-warmed dust and fur from his body. Nicky would be there for me. As unfair as it was of me to ask him, he'd be there. Thank you, Goddess, for Nicky Kestrel.

That night, after we'd made the trip home (easier this time—nothing to throw up!) and I'd stayed up to make sure Nicky made it safely, and after

Bracken and I had made love, I perched my chin on Bracken's chest and looked at him, worrying at the precious curve of his ear with my finger.

"What?" he asked softly.

"There will be police tomorrow."

"Yes. You can take care of them, right?"

I'd done it before, inadvertently, but I still knew how to talk to people with power in my voice and make them believe that what I was saying was true. "I can try," I said gamely, hoping it was true.

"That's not what you were thinking about," he murmured gently, pulling his hand through my hair and taking out the band, which was hanging by a little clump at the back of my head, "You were thinking about Nicky."

"Among other things." My head was once again becoming crowded with things I didn't feel like sharing. Maybe, a little voice nagged, they were right. Maybe, I needed to dump my shit in someone else's yard just so I could have some room in my head for something nice, something peaceful—something *besides* shit.

"But Nicky first. Yes."

"Yes what?" I knew Bracken didn't read my mind—not like Green. But it was getting to be spooky how well he could read me. I just didn't know if he was saying yes to what I was really thinking.

"Yes, you can and you should make love to Nicky on other nights besides date night." His mouth clenched a little as he said it, but not too much and I wrinkled my forehead at him. Oh, yeah, he did know what I was really thinking.

"It would...complicate...things," I fretted. His hand smoothed down my back, touching the tattoo that Davy noticed on Thursday. I could practically hear his own tattoo—similar with the weaving of Green's lime leaves and my oak leaves and Adrian's roses, but wound from his wrist to his elbow—cooing to mine in sympathy.

"What complicates things is that you worry. Nicky knows that Green and I come first. You worry that giving him more than this little tiny part of yourself will lead him on. All it does is give you more to worry about, and more for him

to be hurt about.”

“You don't even like Nicky.”

“I didn't like that he thought he had a right to you,” he corrected, and I looked at his face in surprise. I didn't think Bracken had read Nicky that way, but he had, and he'd been right. “He doesn't think like that anymore. He's trying to find a way to have a path to you. You need to clear the path, beloved. You are stuck with each other, for better or worse, and it would be better for us all if it was a peaceful thing.”

I sighed, and he pulled me up so I was sprawled almost completely on his body and then rubbed my cheek with his own—an oddly tender gesture that had the tension melting from my spine and the lines on my face easing, just with the ease of his love. “I'll think about it,” I murmured.

“You think too much,” he grouched. “It would have been better for us all tonight if you'd stopped thinking and come back from the aerie all sweaty and mussed.”

“He was asking if he should leave the hill,” I said, and I heard my hurt, reflected back at Bracken in my voice.

“Give him a reason to stay,” he said softly, and I nodded, thinking about it until he threatened to go get Green and have him will me sleep. Of course, Bracken could do that on his own, but Green had more finesse. When I woke up in the morning I could smell dust and fur and feathers under Bracken's stone-and-sun smell, and my conclusion was still the same. I had marked my back for Nicky; maybe it was time I let him into my heart.

The police were there at the track the next day. Young, bland-faced officers that reminded me only a little of Max before he'd started being a person and stopped being a cop. In fact, I was almost glad that Renny and Max had fought, once again, about the same thing, and that Renny was too blue for her fickle felinity to see her through another day at school. On the one hand, it was one more thing on my worry list—I didn't think she was going to make it through school at this rate, and I didn't know what else she wanted to do with her life at the hill. On the other hand, she was worse at the dodge and evade thing than I was, and Nicky and Bracken had their hands full.

We got there just as Davy arrived, and I put a careful hand on her arm at

the questions, and she cast me an unfriendly look but followed my lead and evaded the police with wide eyes and 'No—I didn't see either of those guys enter the track.' 'I didn't see anyone who looked strong enough to do that to them.' Both statements were, of course, true. However, as innocent as Davy and I appeared, the cops had it in for Bracken.

"You look pretty big, sir—I imagine you could throw a guy a few feet," the oldest of the cops said. Wow—that was subtle.

I stepped in quickly. "He wasn't even here, officer," I said tersely. I probably should have been all smiling and obsequious and crap, but Davy was looking murder at me and the cops were looking at Bracken like he was a total psychopath, and it was time to get out on the track and talk. Panic, urgency, fear for Davy, the warmth that was Bracken, vibrating like heat off a rock next to me, and that new, subtle dusty-musky thing that was Nicky when he was thinking of me—I let it build in my chest as I spoke.

"He wasn't here. You don't need to know his name. He's not nearly as freakin' big as he looks right now. In fact, we're all pretty fucking nondescript. Say bye bye now."

"Bye bye," the two men echoed blankly, and I steelled myself for Bracken's ironic look before he took my pack and dragged Nicky up the stairs.

If I hadn't been able to guess from her seething anger, her first words to me after we'd stretched in silence and started trotting down the slick brown track made it painfully obvious that Kyle hadn't talked to Davy about anything important.

"What are you, a Jedi master?" She hissed after we were out of earshot of the blank-eyed officers and the incriminating yellow tape.

"Do I look like Carrie Fisher?" Ah, if only.

"No—but you just totally...you had that guy agreeing to whatever you said..." Her voice trailed off. It was impossible. What was 'impossible' always seemed to make people doubt what their senses told them was true.

"Did you have a good weekend?" I asked, hoping against hope that she was just being dense and Kyle hadn't wussied out.

"Yeah—I loved that hotel you got us into," she said, and for a moment she

had some real enthusiasm, "and that boss guy, Andres, was really dishy." She chatted about her trip for the next mile, and I asked appropriate questions (and made appropriate comments—yes—Andres was dishy, really, wasn't it interesting that they had a suite with no windows in the core of the hotel) the whole time I was thinking that Green and Bracken really were going to have to hold Kyle down so I could compel him to take care of his own goddamned business.

"Is Kyle going to take Andres up on his offer?" I said finally, at the same time thinking *please please please please...anything*. This bizarre suspended state of emotional constipation was starting to piss me off.

"I don't know..." We had been planning for two miles today with a quarter mile cool down, but now, with another quarter mile to go, Davy was slowing down. I looked at her in surprise, and when she cast a furtive glance at Bracken, who was sitting in the stands, getting wet and watching us with tranquil eyes, I figured she wanted more time to talk. I slowed down with her, secretly grateful because my body was bitching at me big time about the extra quarter mile, and she nodded. "I think he's ready to sign on with your boss." She gnawed her lower lip.

Frickin' hallelujah. "Is that bad?"

"Nobody's said anything about that attack," she said at last, her eyes darting to the blank-eyed cops, who had still not recovered from the double whammy I'd thrown at them. "I woke up on the way to San Francisco, and Kyle said it was because we needed to avoid police questions, and when I asked him why the police would want to know, and if he knew what had attacked us..." she shook her head, "he said you and your boss would take care of it. He told me he'd explain everything in San Francisco. But instead, we spent this really great time in San Francisco in this fabulous room with no windows, and when we were coming home early this morning, I realized we hadn't talked about it at all. I brought it up and he looked at me...gees...Cory, he looked at me like he might never see me again and told me that he'd tell me tonight. I don't...his eyes. It was like...it was like he was saying goodbye and begging me not to go and...and at the same time, that attack thing was really weird. And..." She looked up, and I didn't have to even see what she saw to know what she was talking about.

Now we both looked, and the destruction had been cleared, leaving only the two policemen loitering there in the rain, but the tape remained.

Davy cleared her throat. "And what did you do?" she asked at last. "Besides your Jedi thing today, I mean. Because suddenly we were running, and there was that stench, and you were making these fly-swatting motions...I heard sounds...I felt stuff but I couldn't see anything. But everybody's talking about these two guys getting killed, and we were here and..."

And suddenly I couldn't lie to her one more time. "Yes," I said abruptly, swinging around to face her. I wiped my face clear of drizzle and tried like hell to look her in the eyes. I couldn't do it. I was telling the truth, and I still couldn't do it. "They tried to kill us, Davy. I can't tell you how, but I can tell you that. I was acting out of self-defense." My breath caught. It was the truth, and it hurt, and just saying that brought up a vision of the dumbass kid I went to school with, leaking his brains out onto the rubberized track. I swallowed, because, dammit, if I didn't toughen up, who would protect Nicky and Bracken? Who would protect her? I made an effort to haul breath through the nail bed that my lungs had become. "Yes, Davy. I'm responsible for that yellow tape. But until your boyfriend steps up and deals, I can't tell you how. And—I can't go to the police about it—they wouldn't believe it and they'd arrest me and too many people need me for that to happen."

"But what did you *do*?" she asked, her voice harsh. Her eyes were wide and bright and her lower lip, pink/blue in the cold, was trembling. Goddess fuck it all—this was why I didn't get human friends, I thought wretchedly, because her misery was my fault and I couldn't even make it go away.

"Kyle will tell you tonight," I said lowly. "He will tell you—just the fact that he let you remember that conversation means that he's planning to tell you." For both our sakes, I hoped that was true.

"Let me remember..." Her voice rose indignantly, and I held up my hand.

"He loves you, Davy. All you have to do for answers is love him enough to not tell him goodbye. I think you do. I've staked a lot on it. But until you talk to him...this is where it's going to have to stay." Her perky brown ponytail was plastered to her neck under her hood, her eyes were red with tears of frustration, and she looked miserable and confused—a wet kitten in a yellow rain poncho—and I found myself looking past her shoulder so I wouldn't start to cry too. I was staring past the grey to the green of the football field when I saw Green.

Confident, beautiful—he was striding across the field, his pretty, pretty yellow hair swinging in a perfect horse-tailed braid down to below his fine and

tight behind. And now I did cry because there was only one reason for him to be here, dressed in a crème colored suit and a long white trench coat. I don't remember what I said to Davy then and I was suddenly no longer tired as I hurtled across the field and into his arms.

He caught me and picked me up and kissed me soundly, and I was so sick of worrying about the human world, and what it thought, and how to blend into it, that I didn't care. I wanted him to kiss me, I wanted his hands on my bottom, I wanted to hold his face and I didn't give a fuck about what the world saw, because, dammit all, he was leaving us again.

"I won't be so long..." he mumbled between kisses. "I swear, luv—a week at most. I promise it won't be long."

I didn't answer, because I didn't want him to make promises it would hurt him to keep. I just kept kissing him until his hands moved behind him and detached my legs and suddenly I was being handed to Bracken. I turned into Bracken's chest with a whimper, and he and Green shook hands or some sort of manly shit like that, and then there was that big, long fingered, tender hand, stroking my hair. He leaned in to whisper, "I'll be home soon, beloved." Then he gave Nicky a firm goodbye kiss and was gone.

I peered out of the shelter of Bracken's arms as that yellow ponytail disappeared beyond the bleachers, and then I saw Nicky. Nicky had spent two weeks losing himself in other people's flesh trying to kill the pain of being bonded to the both of us. He had just embarked on a very sweet love affair with a very nice man in order to build a place in his heart that was his alone. He had just offered to move away from the home he loved to make things easier on me.

He looked as lonely as I've ever seen anyone look in my life.

I said his name and opened an arm, still in the circle that was Bracken, and he made a forlorn little noise and launched himself at me. We stood there, the three of us, shivering in the drizzle, trying to pull ourselves together now that Green was gone again.

Eventually Brack and Nicky needed to go get our packs and I was surprised that when they moved away, Davy was still there, sitting on a sideline bench and staring at me with eyes so lost she made the wet kitten analogy look like a pacing jungle cat.

"I don't understand," she said through a hoarse throat.

"Its..."

"Don't say it's Kyle's job to explain it to me," she snapped, angry. "You and Bracken—you love each other as much as anyone I've ever seen in my life. But... what I just saw...what kind of woman are you?"

I wanted to say I was a lost one, but she'd think the wrong thing. I wanted to say I was powerful, but she'd picture me in black leather with a whip or something and that was so beyond funny I didn't even want to start. I was suddenly more than aware of the difference between human and not-quite-human, and I wanted...desperately, I wanted her to see me as just like her.

"In...in my world...in our world...we don't have 'boyfriends' or 'fiancés' or even 'husbands'..." I said, watching with distant eyes as two of the men in my life grabbed their stuff.

"But you and Bracken..."

"Hush," I murmured, without heat. They had turned and were looking at me now, and I knew that with their hyper-hearing, they could hear every word. "You asked and here I am, giving you hard truth." I looked down at the toe of my sneaker and made myself stop digging a muddy hole in the turf of the field. "The hard truth is that my world and Kyle's world are very much the same. We don't have those people, the way you think about them. We have 'lovers' and they can be anybody—friends, brothers, warm bodies in the night—and we have 'beloveds'—and we love them beyond death. We love them so much that death has no meaning, and life has no meaning without them. And there's not a number or a type or a box for these people. They are who they are."

My voice fell evenly, almost song-like from my throat. This story was passion and pain and still a churn and a roil in my heart, but what fell from my lips was poetry. I could no longer deny, even to myself, that the men in my heart were poetry. "Adrian was my beloved, and Green was his beloved, and then Green was my beloved, and for the briefest, happiest time of my life, we were...we were something so sublime that there's not even a word for it. But Adrian died, quickly, violently...and...Green and I lost our beloved, and Bracken lost his brother and... and the grief..."

I looked at her now, and she was listening, no judgment, no anything. She

was simply mesmerized by my song, and so I looked across the track and met Bracken's eyes, and I kept singing.

"The grief was the howl of the earth, when it's ripped asunder. It was, and still is, the scream of a wind as it uproots trees, houses, people's dreams. It's a shriek in our hearts like an unholy music box, and when we least expect it, the box is opened by a careless hand and then we are all razed to our knees, our hands over our ears, wailing in counterpoint." And suddenly the churn and the roil in my heart took over my chest and my throat and tightened my tongue and my face. "And Bracken and I held each other in our grief, and we found that when we touched, that wail became a melody—heart-rending, but not harsh. And he is my beloved too."

"And Nicky?"

"Nicky's my lover. By necessity—don't ask me to explain. We must be this thing to each other or he dies. And so must he and Green. The four of us...we're so tangled in love, so bound by emotion, by bonds of fate and pain and life and death—not even we can see where love for one of us ends and the other begins." I took my eyes from the toe of my mud-covered white running shoe, from the shiny red-brown track, from the gold of Bracken's sympathetic eyes as he neared us, shouldering our packs as he shouldered my sorrow and confusion and defensiveness. Now I truly looked at Davy, and I saw myself as I must have been last year, when it was just me and my vampire against the world. I was smaller then.

"We live in a vast world, Davy. Bigger than you imagine, more complicated than you ever thought possible. And Kyle has made you a part of it, and that's for him to explain. It's scary. There are deaths and pain and brutality that I don't ever want you to imagine, much less know." I turned to Bracken now, and was going to take his hand, but he wrapped his arm around my shoulder, giving me just enough room to turn to her, as she sat on the wet metal bench in the rain. "But there's sweetness here too, Davis Stacia—remember that when you talk with Kyle. So much of it hurts, but there is sweetness, and beauty, and love."

"Will I think it's worth it?" she asked, but the heat from Bracken's arm was seeping through my wet T-shirt, and suddenly, Davy and Kyle were their own concerns and not mine.

"Absofuckinglutely," I called over my shoulder. I leaned my head against Bracken as we walked. Half-way down the track, Nicky caught up with us and

took my free hand, his skin warm against mine, the scent of dust and animal faint under the wet. The last I saw of her was the sprites I had assigned to watch over her, hovering about six feet above her head, blinking merry blue and red and purple and green twinkles in the grey.

BRACKEN

Twisted Routes

Davy didn't show up to run with Cory for the next three days. Watching her steel her expression for the disappointment when her friend didn't show was as painful as pretending with her that it didn't matter if she did.

The sprites checked in periodically, telling us that Davy was okay, which was, I think, the only reason my beloved didn't track her down just to make sure, and Cory ran with Renny and her iPod instead.

Renny and Max were 'taking a break' (Max's words, tortured and wounded as they were) which meant, I think, that neither of them could think of a way to resolve their original problem—should Max or shouldn't he become a part of our world. Cory remained hopeful on the matter, saying dryly that Max was already a part of our world—he just didn't realize it yet, and I was content to rely on her judgment.

So for three days, Nicky and I sat, thankful for the heavy grey clouds that, for this week, were not spewing water, and watched the women run the track. Renny, as feline in human form as she was when she wore fur, did not prattle as much as Davy, but every now and then one of them would gasp a quick comment and the other one would smile or nod, and then their footfalls would resume regularity, comfortable in their companionship.

Today, Nicky looked up from his textbook long enough to comment, "It's hard to watch her hope."

"Yes," I said quietly. "I don't even know what she's hoping for and it's hard."

Nicky turned to me, a rust-colored eyebrow arched. "You don't know?"

I shook my head. Nicky and I had reached...*détente* I guess was the word. I knew Cory hadn't taken him into her bed yet without the 'date night' restriction, but she'd been free about taking his hand, kissing his cheek, or wrapping her arm around his waist and accepting his arm around her shoulder. Nicky seemed grateful—and even content—with these attentions, and in his turn, he was careful to give me precedence in all matters concerning Cory, which was all I think I ever wanted in the first place.

"She's hoping that a part of her is still human," Nicky murmured, his eyes back on the two women on the track. Even as a human, Renny's legs seemed to blur independently of her body. It suddenly occurred to me that Renny was probably not comfortable running as a girl—she was out there for Cory. Considering her jealousy of Davy, I was touched on Cory's behalf.

I sighed. "Dominic, I love her with all of my soul," I said softly, "But I saw her, all those nights ago when Adrian wanted me to see the love of his undeath—she didn't even know what she was then, and I knew she was too good to be human."

"Yeah, Bracken, I know," he murmured, "But when I met her, human was all I was hoping for...it's a hard dream to let go of."

I didn't know, so I couldn't argue. One more thing to bring up to Hallow, I guessed, who, after pulling thoughts from her like teeth from a tyrannosaur for a month was taking to her new attitude of grudging expansiveness with an almost ghoulish enthusiasm. For her part, Cory had left their last session looking like her stomach hurt and had run as though Hollow Man were after her all over again.

She wasn't running like that today, however. She was tired today—we all were. Renny had decided to come back to school, so in addition to staying up late and helping Renny with her own studies, midterms had arrived for all of our other classes, and we had all stayed up to write papers, prep notes, and finish our reading. It did not bother me so much—after around our fortieth year my species as a whole doesn't need much sleep—I often got up when Cory was sleeping and visited the common room. Even Nicky and Renny, with their quick metabolism and shape-shifters energy weren't too affected by the three days without. But Cory's footfalls were sluggish and her arms pumped clumsily and out of sync today, and I realized that I'd become accustomed to her strength and her energy. She had been right—she had taken up running to build her strength, and it was working—but not today.

Nicky noticed it too. "Think she's up to going out to Camp Far West tonight?"

"No," I said decisively. "But we still need to go." The vampires were coming up tonight to paint and lay flooring for the entire house. Someone needed to be there—someone of rank—to keep things running smoothly. Nicky and I qualified, mostly because we were sleeping with the two most powerful

people in the hill, but also because we had helped organize the thing and knew what everybody was planning. We had also ordered the supplies and read the directions.

"So..." he asked, looking at me dubiously.

"We let her fall asleep and sneak out of the hill." I kept my voice tranquil, but I was not nearly so sanguine about the plan. With the mood she'd been in since Green left, sanguine was probably a good word choice—that was a lot of my blood she'd be willing to spill if she realized I'd gone out unprotected on my own. But she was tired, and I was not, and I'd be damned if I hauled her up that road to get sick again and then let her sleep, cold and miserable in the car, which would be the only place to sit out of the way when we were working.

Nicky thought this over very carefully. "It's a good thing you're the one sleeping with her regularly," he said after a moment. "I don't know if I'd want to be you when she wakes up."

"If you're lucky, you'll get some backlash action," I said as I gathered backpacks, and he brightened. Eric had left this morning, looking sadder than I'd seen him since he'd left the hill the first time. I had given him a hard time about how, in the old days, he wouldn't have let business interfere with his personal life, and he'd given me a twisted smile. "In the old days, I didn't have a business," he returned with a hug, and I felt for him. I couldn't imagine any business pressing enough to make me leave the hill I loved, and the woman I loved more. But leave he did, although he promised to return soon. I didn't know the details but I knew that he and Nicky had come to some sort of understanding that did not include Nicky sleeping with the rest of the hill in the meantime. Nicky seemed to have found his balance, and I was happy for him.

I gazed wistfully out at Cory as she and Renny finished their run, Cory guzzling water from the bottle she'd left by the track. Now, if only...

When we got home, she crashed within an hour, dozing off as she was knitting on the couch. The sitting room was semi-full—Corge, Gref, Sweet, and Ellen Beth were in there, watching a movie, and Renny was curled into a lonely ball at Cory's feet. I eased away from the couch and signaled to Nicky, who, in his turn, nodded and stood up as well. Arturo intercepted us at the doorway, shaking his head in disgust.

"Where do you think you're going without her?" he asked. Grace stood by

him, her arms crossed and her eyebrows raised. They had been talking quietly in the kitchen, hands clasped, half-smiles on their faces, as we had made our stealthy way towards the door.

"The Avian property," I hushed, looking over to where she was sitting. She had turned so that her cheek was on the arm of the couch, and a part of me wanted to go pick her up and move her because that was just going to tweak her neck. "I thought you'd be going, Grace."

"Mnn." She shook her head no. "Too much to do keeping their food fed." She smiled playfully, and I realized how much we'd missed her, relaxed and happy at her home, since Chloe had arrived. Humans...Goddess could they complicate things. "There are perks to being den mama," she added, and Arturo looked at her sideways.

"I should hope so," he murmured, turning back to us. "You realize she's going to be pissed enough to crack the sky. And Grace and I are going to have to pick up the pieces."

"Yeah, Arturo," I said, dodging inside the kitchen to grab an apple, "But she loves you guys—you'll be fine. If she catches the two of us, she'll cut off our balls and serve them to Marcus and Phillip for lunch, so can we go? And hey—could you give us a ten minute head start and then pick her up and take her to her room? She'll never sleep like that."

"Any other duties you'd like me to take over?" he asked sourly, but Grace elbowed him sharply in the ribs, so he gestured for the door, and we practically ran Chloe over on the way out.

The apple was not enough, so we stopped by the Starbucks in Lincoln on our way and practically bought out their entire pastry section, and drove off into the night. Near the turn from 65 to McCourtney there was an enormous grain silo that was lit up pinkly against the dark. After that, there was nothing but houselights, headlights, and moonlight for miles, and this night, the moon was down. I drove quickly—if Cory wasn't there to get queasy I enjoyed driving fast—and Nicky and I discussed the frustrating topic of Hollow Man.

We had sent Ellis and Leah to the address Ellen Beth had given us, but it was an apartment and already rented out to someone else—not even the stench of our adversary remained. When we had turned the hill out to search for Sezan and Crispin last summer, we had at least known our enemy was in Folsom—and

probably not in one of the newer neighborhoods either. But Hollow Man had attacked us in Auburn, in Sacramento—he'd even left a trail of sylph dust in Marin County—and he'd originated from Huston, of all places. We didn't have enough people, or enough leads, to guess where he was. About all we could do was protect ourselves from him, and hope the next time he attacked, we took him out.

"And that doesn't even count the people he controls," Nicky said with disgust. "I have no idea how he made those guys fly. Twilight said he had power like Cory's—sidhe magic, but bigger, but I can't imagine Cory throwing people around like missiles."

"I don't think he was throwing them around," I murmured. "His big thing is infection...I think he just 'infected' those guys with power—sort of the same way you infect a culture with greed, or a mob with anger." Besides 'How is Cory', this had been a hot topic at the hill, and we all had our theories.

"I'm sorry...I didn't quite hear you." Nicky shook his head, and I reached out and turned down the radio. We had just hit the place in the road where the curves started, and without the moon, it felt like our headlights were cutting a tunnel through the foliage. The radio made things less lonely.

"I think he...infects them. With himself, with his blood. It makes sense—that detestable asshole and his buddy...they would have been totally vulnerable to Hollow Man—they would have been begging him for his bite, for sex, for whatever. We're so used to the idea that the Goddess changes clean out our blood for the weres and vamps that we forget that humans live in fear of blood diseases." I had been thinking about this carefully—especially with Cory's suggestion that she blood this enemy, and the idea scared me more now than it had when she brought it up.

Nicky was shaking his head again, almost like a dog hearing a whistle, but he was concentrating on what I was saying. "That's the best theory I've heard so far..." He grimaced. "Speaking of hear do you hear...watch out!"

I squinted at the road and saw nothing, and then the car struck an unmovable object and it was all I could do to keep it on the road. I cut the next blind corner on the wrong side, praying there was nobody coming towards me and swore. "It's him, isn't it," I asked, and Nicky held his hands over his ears and whimpered in answer. Fuck. I couldn't see him, he could be fucking *anywhere*. I looked to Nicky for help, but he could barely function over the sound, and the

keening he was making was grating on my nerves. I concentrated on the road and hit the accelerator, and swore again when the road veered right and he hit us on the left, trying to force the car off the steep verge.

This part of the road came with a cell phone blackout, and we needed help. Without even asking permission I grabbed Nicky's hand as it clutched his ear, drove like a madman and thought of our beloved with every ounce of intensity I could spare.

CORY

Distorted Destinations

Chloe's indignant squawk pulled me out of the nicest dream. I was in bed, sleeping, surrounded by all of them, Bracken, Green, even Nicky, and we were all soft and sweet with each other, and the sex was there, but the touching, the balance— it was like one of those chords in choir that gives you goose bumps of perfection.

Chloe's shriek was so discordant it made me mad enough to smack her.

Renny thought so too, because she did one of those cat-splang things that makes you think of cartoon cats with their claws in the ceiling. By the time she settled down into a crouching ball of hiss in the corner of the couch, I'd looked blearily around the living room and realized that Bracken and Nicky were both gone.

"I'll fry them!" I shouted, and saw that the elves in the sitting room were looking at me sideways, half amused and half alarmed. I grabbed my knitting bag which had my wallet and my car keys in it too and charged the door, barefoot, bed-headed, and wearing sweats, a T-shirt and an old Mr. Rodger's cardigan I'd smuggled out of Green's closet.

I was nearing the door when I ran into Arturo with enough force to send me backwards into Grace who'd moved in hyperspeed to catch me.

"Not tonight, Little Goddess," he said calmly, with so much parental authority in his voice that the temper I'd been about to spill off my tongue rearranged itself.

Unfortunately, what came out sounded a lot like whining. "Arturo—they're out there, in the dark, without me. I was supposed to go with them..."

"And *Nicky* and *Bracken*," he emphasized, "Both agreed that you were too tired and that you should stay home and get some rest. And if Grace and I hadn't agreed with them, we would have woken you up," he said firmly.

I was glaring at him, I realized, like a child glares at a parent, but I couldn't seem to help myself. Uncle Arturo, I'd called him, and usually that was a good thing—when it went my way. "Aren't I supposed to be some sort of authority here?" I snapped, and realized how arrogant that sounded when I saw his lips quirk upward.

"Yes, *mija*, and if you shake your rattle and stomp your little foot hard enough, we will all rush to do your bidding," he said mildly, and after sustaining my glare for another five seconds, I found I was giggling with him.

"If you try to change my diaper I'll cook you," I muttered, and he ruffled my hair in response.

"Now see, mom—*this* is what I don't understand," Chloe snapped breaking the moment. Grace sighed behind me, and I wasn't imagining the tightening of her arms around my shoulders before she released me and straightened towards her daughter. "You tell me she's some sort of 'mighty leader' and then you go and treat her like a child—who *is* she to you?"

"She's twenty, Chloe," Grace snapped over my shoulder, "Even Alexander the fucking Great had people to remind him to rest." And with another silent hug, she moved away. "I've got things to do—was there something you wanted?" Grace moved towards the hallway, leaving Chloe to glare at me as though the whole thing were my fault.

"You know, Chloe," I said in disgust, "You might try to not be a flaming bitch to the woman who birthed you, okay?"

"Like you know so much about mothers," Chloe sneered. "Look to your own relationship with your mother before you start lecturing me about mine, okay?"

"What do you know about my mother?" I asked, a sneaking suspicion forming in my mind. I hadn't heard from Mom since she'd crashed into Grace's store—but that didn't mean she hadn't been calling. Something in my voice must

have gotten Renny's back up, because she came up by my side and growled softly.

"Keep that...thing...away from me," Chloe said uneasily. I don't think she was over watching Renny just appear naked in front of her.

"That 'thing' is my best friend," I snapped, suddenly as out of patience as Grace. "Why can't you just deal with us like people?"

"Because you 'people' think you're so damned special! You're just the same as the rest of us—just ask her boyfriend."

"What about Max?"

"He's no better than any other man—I saw him tonight at Denny's with a blonde with big boobs...wha' the..."

The rest of Chloe's venom was lost as Renny let out a snarl and literally ran over her on the way to the door. Hell's bells.

"Damn," I muttered as I started out towards the door. Quicker than blinking Renny turned girl, opened the door, then turned cat and left. "I don't know where she thinks she's going—I'm going to have to drive."

"Grace will drive," Arturo spat, stepping over Chloe's prone and sputtering body, "Mostly because Bracken took your car." And with that he blurred down the hall to go get Grace from the darkling, and I realized that he was right; Nicky drove the Ninja, and Bracken drove my SUV—which he had taken when they slunk out of the common room like the cowards they both were. There were other vehicles down there—the garage was huge, there were at least twenty—but none that I had the keys to. I was all for grabbing Renny by the scruff of her neck and hauling her back into the house when Grace blurred in and opened the door to the one automobile I least wanted to get in.

"Oh, you've got to be shitting me," I groaned as I opened the door and let Renny into the flamboyantly purple hearse that Green had bought specifically for the vampires. It looked young and funky, and it was set up so that in a pinch, between three and five vampires could lay out, flip a switch, and be protected from the sun for the rest of the day. Last summer we'd had to stuff Adrian in the trunk of Arturo's Cadillac to keep him safe from the brutal June sun—I remember wishing we'd had this car at the time, but I sure didn't want to drive in it now.

"It's what we've got, sweetie," Grace muttered as she turned over the engine. Practically before it caught, she threw the hearse into gear and backed out of the garage and into the drive-circle, spewing gravel everywhere as she threw the car forward and tore off down the driveway. I made sure my seatbelt was fastened and looked sourly at Renny, who was still in cat form, then held on tight as we made the hardest of rights and disappeared down Foresthill Road.

By the time we squealed across the I-80 overpass and into Denny's parking lot, I was praying Max was there because between Grace's frustrated anger and Renny's vicious jealousy, this whole situation was going to need more than my ham-handed humanity to chill everybody out. Grace hadn't spoken a word during the twenty minute flight over what should have been forty minutes of road, and Renny had kept up a feral, non-stop growling. It was funny how, even when I was sure we were all going to die on that damn road, it never occurred to me that Max had found an alternative to Renny, even on their so-called 'break'. Sometimes we read people better just because we're *not* close to them. There would be an explanation, of this I was sure.

My faith wasn't shaken, even as we narrowly missed plowing into Max's Mustang and slammed to a halt on the blacktop behind Denny's. It was one of Green's places, so it was impeccably kept up, but it was still a Denny's, and after eating at Grace's table for nearly three months straight, the smells behind the restaurant did nothing to make me long for dinner. Grace jumped out of the car before the engine died, and Renny was right behind her. I got out on my side a little more sedately. It pained me to admit it, but after three nights of little sleep and no sex, I was really as tired as Bracken had thought. It did not excuse my two scheming dumb-ass lovers, but it was true.

Grace stood by the car, stewing, and Renny went pounding up to a pained-looking Max and his very surprised blonde companion—who had, like Max, a pair of blue, nearly crossed eyes. They didn't look so charming on her, but they were definitely similar.

Renny stood on her hind legs, planted her forelegs on the woman's stiff shoulders, and growled, her whiskers coming up and her mouth opening slightly to reveal that enormous pink tongue as she smelled her prospective victim. I assumed she was looking for the smell of sex with Max, which Renny would know well by now. What she smelled instead, I was sure, was the feminine version of her lover, which explained her puzzled snarl and her immediate retreat to prowl ruminatively around Max's black and silver Mustang.

"Your sister, I presume," I said blandly, and Max nodded, with a sigh.

"I saw Chloe when she stopped for gas—I knew something like this was going to happen." He muttered something that sounded like "vindictive bitch" under his breath, and then covered his eyes. "Sorry Grace," he murmured, and he sounded sincere.

"Don't be sorry." Grace shook her head and sighed, the anger seeming to seep out of her to hear the thought voiced by someone else. "It's true." She slumped against the hearse, and I turned with a sheepish smile towards Max's sister, who was still staring, wide eyed, at the giant cat that had, as far as she knew, just threatened to eat her throat out while her brother stood by and watched. It was a nice night, I thought inanely—chilly, as it should be in early March, but with a promise—a smell of magnolias and honeysuckle and early roses on the air—a certainty of spring.

"Hi," I said greenly into that mix of old Denny's and new Mother Nature, "I'm Cory. It's nice to meet Max's family."

"What in the hell is that animal doing out without a leash?" She sputtered, finally sure Renny wasn't going to shed any of her blood.

"We usually keep her on one," I said dryly, "but tonight he's hanging out with you."

Max coughed to smother a laugh, and said, "Michelle, meet Cory. Cory, Michelle. Cory's a member of...my girlfriend's family," he said it smoothly, without even a hitch, and I raised my eyebrows at his careful duplicity. He was as good at this as I was. "In fact, she's one of the heads of the family."

"Max overstates things." I was running out of things to say, because Michelle was looking at me like I was sprouting mold spores.

"You're responsible for this?" she asked incredulously, and Max held up his hands, absolving himself of any responsibility for her actions. "My brother was a nice boy—you and your freak show have totally turned him into some sort of hippie loving heathen and I want to know what you're going to do about it!"

"I'm at a loss..." I said, looking to Max. For his part he held out one hand and gestured to his sister, as though he knew the only cure for her was to let her rant herself out.

"He doesn't believe in God anymore, do you know that?" she asked, stomping her foot. She was wearing a denim skirt and a plain brown shirt, too large, with three buttons at the collar. She may have had big boobs, like Chloe said, but if she did, they were covered by the demure/butt ugly clothes.

"I know for a fact that's not true," I answered calmly. I did know—Bracken had told me about their conversation.

"He talks about this 'Goddess' of yours like She's a real thing. He told Daddy that he couldn't go to our church anymore because he said that any church that taught 'intolerance as dogma' was not somewhere he wanted to be. Daddy's been preaching at that church for all of Max's life!" Michelle was obviously distraught, and I could read from Max's expression that this was a part of his life that he hadn't wanted us to know. Suddenly, Renny was there, rubbing against Max's legs in sympathy. He looked at her sadly, then dropped his hand to rub her tenderly between the ears.

"I take it your church is against gay rights?" I said quietly to Max, and he nodded, quirking his mouth up in a depressing parody of Green's usual wry expression.

"Against gun control, gay rights, abortion, sex education, science fiction, and money for the arts...etcetera etcetera..."

"Etcetera," I finished, and I turned to Michelle sympathetically, but determined that she not hurt my friend anymore. "Sweetheart, your brother is a good man. He is compassionate, and brave, and honorable in ways that you will never know. We know this about him—we treasure this about him. Can't you accept this..." Oh shit. A sudden feeling of dread washed over me, almost sending me to my knees. "Accept this about him the way we..." Oh, Jesus. It flooded me, and I struggled to stay upright.

"Cory..." Max was by my side, and Renny was suddenly a naked girl in the chill March, holding my elbow. I could see them as clear as the purple sky above me, Bracken squinting at the road, Nicky clutching his ears, and I could feel their panic. Oh shit. I knew that road, those twists. There was a cell phone blackout there and they were under attack, and they were scared and they were...

Longing. Longing to go back to the living room where they could see me one last time. Fuck it all if that was the last time they would see me.

"BRACKEN!" I don't know if I screamed it out loud, but I know Green was suddenly in my head. Max and Renny were talking to me, so I choked out "Brack and Nicky...attacked." And then my skin turned cold and I went back to the place in my head where I could see them, feel their panic, let them know I was there.

Vampires. Green said in my head, his panic as breathless as mine. *Call them.*

Of course. The vampires were near them. They were just a couple of hills and a lake away. I screamed to Marcus and Grace, and could barely hear Max's sister saying, 'Oh my God!' as Grace launched herself into the air and disappeared into the night, and then I was in the thick of it, in Marcus' head, in Grace's head, seeing a giant slice of sky between my feet and the ground and a brutal, chill and humid wind whipping my hair around my face, and I heard, for the first time, the brain-chatter of my brethren as they called to each other through the night.

It was too loud, the wind and the blur of the wide and treed green under me, the moonlight and the brain-chatter and I almost shrieked and yanked myself out of their minds, but Bracken swore and something smacked the SUV sideways and I could feel the wheel jerking skin from his palms as he wrestled the damn thing on the road and I had just enough of myself left to start reciting vectors before I pulled myself together for him and started ordering vampires.

Tell Bracken to stay on the road until the levee. I didn't know how to separate Green from the vampires in my head, but he knew who I was talking to because he murmured, *Done*, and Bracken's emotions grew a little less frantic, a little more sure.

And then I made a picture in Grace and Marcus' head, as clear and as simple as I could, and waited for their replies. I could taste Marcus' coffee in my throat when he spoke, and Grace's diet soda, but I didn't care. There was a terrible, breathless pause for me, and suddenly I was back in my own body, breathing like I'd been underwater for a minute. Right now I could feel my real heart beating in my real throat, and the bruises of Max's fingers as they dug into my arm and hear the bizarre monologue of stupid questions from his dumb-ass sister, but I knew a minute ago, I hadn't been there, in my own body. Even now I was more aware of Green, inside my head, holding my mental hand than I was of my own flesh. The wind, blowing through Grace and Marcus as they called

the other whipping black shapes through the sky, and then I could see the lake, beneath Marcus' feet, and the levee with the iron bridge only a stone's throw before him, and the pause was over and the phalanx building began—all, all more real to me than the laboring of my own heart and the bursting of frozen lungs.

The vampires formed two circles, one inside the other, the vampires I'd blooded on the outside, led by Marcus and Phillip, facing out, the one's I didn't know as intimately on the inside, led by Grace, facing inward. They hovered there, flying people, dressed in jeans and slacks and gauzy dresses, as varied as people in a government courthouse, against the black reflection of the stars drowned in the water and the silver of the moonlight on the sweep of horse country. Their urgency had brought out their hunting faces, the pointed teeth, the elongated jaws, the stretched tendons in the neck and pulsing at their temples and in their human clothes they looked alien and feral and frightening. For a moment they were still, seeming to listen, but when their nostrils flared and the howl of revulsion passed among them, I knew that they'd been waiting for the stench of emptiness, of foul selfishness that took the Hollow Man beyond death, and beyond even a vampire's redemption.

A hundred heartbeats after the stench descended, we could hear the whine of the SUV's engine—it sounded off, as though it were overheating or running badly. Fifty more heartbeats, and it burst from the cover of the foliage, the horrid dark blur of the Hollow Man battering at the side of the car as it came. The front windshield was shattered, the grill dented inward, the hood crumpled, and even through the shattered glass Marcus could see both airbags were deployed. They were smeared with red.

Easy, beloved. Green prayed inside my head. Nicky's moving and Bracken's still on the road.

Not for long. Not if he listened to Green. Not if he trusted us. I knew he trusted us. Please Goddess, please God, please Goddess, please God don't let us let him down.

The engine whined faster, and the only part of me left that was sane started whispering vectors again. *Seventy miles per hour equals how many feet per second on the x axis times the cosine of gravity on the y axis and how many feet did he have before the car hit the goddamned lake and let the vampires be close enough please let them be close enough open ranks open ranks open ranks*

OPEN YOUR GODDAMNED RANKS!!!!

And the SUV launched itself off the levee, whining in acceleration, missing the slope of wicked rocks and heading straight towards the vampires. And the vampires opened ranks.

And I waged a silent battle with myself, while Marcus, Grace and Green shouted *NOW! DO IT NOW!* And even to save Nicky and Bracken I was afraid, but the car was plunging towards the water, and drowning was one thing that could kill them both and Green promised me it would work and...

Power flooded through the vampires in the outer ring, from their hands, their eyes, their mouths, a glow of sunshine power that should have killed them, but because we'd shared blood, shared power, and because Green was inside me, sheathing my power with his, it didn't. It formed a giant bubble, like the one that I'd used to protect Davy and I, but this one was a boil of light, surrounding the outer ring of vampires, and keeping everybody inside safe.

The car crashed into the floor of the bubble of power with a scream of tortured metal and pulverized glass, and Grace could hear the thump of Bracken's big body as the momentum snapped his seatbelt and threw him through the windshield to lie, bleeding, on the layer of light suspended over the water. My body bucked, dying for oxygen, as I fought to sustain the shield strength, then calmed as the shudders from the collision subsided. Nicky morphed as soon as the windshield disintegrated; only some of the wounds he'd had in the terrible journey would heal with his change. He flew frantically around the car's crippled space until one of the vampires ripped the door off and let him free.

The stench disappeared as soon as the shield went up, and there was an agonized shriek that rent the air and made Nicky positively insane with the pain of the sound, and I realized that there were power bursts flashing from the vampires, from their mouths, their hands, and their eyes as they targeted the Hollow Man. He flew ineffectually around the glowing ball that was the whole stinking lot of us, working together, protecting our own. His shriek intensified, and again, and Phillip caught him in his boiling glare and pinned him against the sky. Through Phillip's eyes I could see his body start to smoke, start to shake but then Grace called my name, and the shield remained, and the power to kill disappeared as I called my attention to Bracken, spurting crimson lifeblood through holes and gashes made by metal and glass, many too deep to heal for a

red-cap, even one who was a full blown sidhe.

I screamed Green's name in my head, and he'd been inside me the whole time, giving me power and focus, and part of the reason the vampires hadn't conflagrated when I'd touched them was that he was there too, a sweet shield of Green like a cover on a power line, allowing the vampires to conduct but not to destruct. And he was a healer, a sweet sweet god of healing and he was inside of me, and I was inside of Grace as she lay her hands on Bracken's face, Bracken's mouth bubbling blood, his chest heaving, losing blood through rips of tattered flesh on his arms, across his stomach, his beautiful face, losing air through a hole in his chest that showed the off-white of struggling lung and I screamed, mentally, physically everyway.

I was tired, I was taxed to everything I had but this was Bracken and I needed Bracken to live and Green needed me to live and Grace screamed my words through a throat that shredded with the force, *Please, Oh Bracken please...*and we flooded her with healing power. His flesh began to re-knit itself, the hole in his chest covering with blood, with bones, with muscle, with skin, the blood stopped bubbling from his lips, falling from his skin, from his limbs, from a cut in his face that sliced through his eye and his cheek, showing shiny bone, and cut by cut by gash by rip in a queasy slide of body, bone and spirit we made my Bracken whole.

He sat up, still on the floor of my bubble and I heard Marcus groan inside my head, a sound echoed by the other vampires; they were agonized, in pain, because Green had pulled the focus of his power from protecting the vampires to healing my beloved and they could stand so much of me, only so much, and I was hurting them and I was exhausted, the blood pounding in my head but I wasn't in my head to feel it and Bracken's pain was mine, on my cheek, on my chest on my flesh, and I couldn't, couldn't think, couldn't mesh with Green, couldn't sustain us and the Hollow Man had fled, broken and hurt and we were safe, for the moment, oh Goddess we were safe and...

My power cut off like a shorted fuse, and abruptly I was myself, inhaling and screaming on the exhale again and again until my throat was raw from screaming, and my body was sore, battered, exhausted from channeling the power, from the healing that passed through it. I was a weapon, not a healer, and I had felt Bracken's wounds in my flesh even as they'd healed. Eventually I couldn't scream anymore, and my screams were coming out weak, Max and Renny were holding me up, although my body had gone limp and dead as I'd left

myself and become Marcus and Phillip and Grace and most of the kiss of vampires, and now I took my own weight for a moment, and just as they let go of me, I puddled to the ground like poured pudding, coughing weakly from aching lungs.

"He's okay," I whimpered. "Oh, Goddess, they're okay."

Max and Renny pulled me up, alarmed when my legs couldn't hold me, and Max swung me up into his arms. Two months ago he had wanted me, and when he'd laid his body next to my fevered one to feed me life force he'd helped to make me strong. Tonight, I felt nothing, no flicker, no buzz no hum of life coming from him. He was merely big, and warm, and human.

"Max will make it better," Renny said, a thread of panic in her voice. "Let Max hold you...he'll make it better."

"But she's not...feeding..." Max said puzzled.

"I need to get back to the hill," I said, as strongly as I knew how.

"Why isn't Max making it better?" Renny sounded plaintive, and scared, and I had to laugh.

"Renny, you dork, why do you think he can't feed me anymore?" I laughed weakly. "Jeez...no wonder you two are making us crazy."

And suddenly, loud, and intrusive, Max's sister got her say. "Good grief, will someone please put some clothes on her!"

Max and Renny locked eyes over my body, for a painful, intimate moment. And for just a moment, Renny, who had a housecat's way of saying 'fuck you' and 'talk to the fuzzy butt' with a flip of her wild, flyaway hair, and who looked as comfortable without clothes as I felt in sweats, was suddenly as naked as I'd ever seen another human being in my life.

"I've got an extra T-shirt and some sweats in the trunk," Max said thickly.

"I remember," she whispered, and reached around my back to take the keys shyly from his pocket.

While Renny dressed herself, Max situated me in the passenger seat of the car so that Renny eventually had to crawl in the back from the driver's seat. Michelle sat herself behind Max, and now that we were in close quarters, her

non-stop bitching was starting to permeate the haze of fear and exhaustion that I'd been swimming in since I came to.

"What do you mean she flew away—people don't fly—what happened to that woman, Max—and how did she know you? Where is that big cat? Where did that naked girl come from? Max, how can you just put a naked girl in your car— Daddy will be so disappointed to know that you keep company with whores and drug addicts. Aren't you a policeman, shouldn't you know better? Who are these girls—how can you just put them in your car—what about the car they came in?"

"Grace will get the car when she gets back," I said, partly in an effort to make her shut up.

"And what was that *light* coming out of you?" she asked, leaning forward as Max started the motor so that she was so close to my face as I leaned sideways that I practically jumped backwards before my muscles gave a whimper and I decided against it. "Are you a Satanist? How could you conjure that weird light— what was that screaming? It sounded like someone was dying and setting you on fire as you went? Max, how could you associate with people who practiced witchcraft? What in the hell happened back there?"

Max turned to me with long suffering eyes. "Cory, you couldn't...you know...put the whammy on her or something, could you?"

"Max, that'll be my first order of business as soon as I can stand up on my own." I was totally sincere.

Renny leaned forward, blocking Max's sister out completely, and asked me quietly what happened.

"He almost got them," I coughed, the pain of the possibility making me weaker. "Hollow Man was slamming into the car, and the SUV didn't have much left, and Bracken was already bleeding...we had him jump the rail at the Far West levee, and...the vampires channeled me and put a shield around it...and Bracken..." My voice broke. "He was all torn, and bleeding...so much blood..." I was shaking all over, and I saw the parts of his body exposed that shouldn't have been and the picture behind my eyes was obscene, like a dog slaughtered on the road, because neither the God nor the Goddess had ever intended her creatures to have their viscera see the light of the moon. I was suddenly as nauseous as I'd ever been and not sure I had the strength to even throw up.

Bracken wasn't here, I thought wretchedly. I couldn't be sick if Bracken wasn't here to pick me up afterwards.

Renny took my hands, rubbing on them with her shape-shifter heat and blowing on them to warm them up. "They're okay, right? C'mon, Cory, tell it all, you need to see them whole...I heard you say it when you came to, you need to say it now."

"Nicky turned bird as soon as the car was still," I said, and I felt stronger just knowing that Nicky was okay.

"Good," she murmured, "Good. Now tell me about Bracken."

"Green...Green was in my head...and I was in Grace's head, and she lay hands on Bracken and...he healed." Strength. Bracken was alive and Green was alive and Nicky was alive and I was strong.

I felt Renny's tears on my hands, and she lay her cheek against them, cat-like, stroking me with her cheek. "You see," she whispered, "They're okay. They're not going to leave us. We'll be okay."

I nodded, and her words calmed me. "We'll be okay," I agreed, my nausea fading. "They're okay. They won't leave us."

There was silence then, a sweet, blessed silence, when even Max's sister recognized that something larger than her own small world had happened. I closed my eyes and drifted for a moment, so lost in exhaustion and aftermath that I almost didn't hear Renny say softly, "I didn't know what you were up against, Max." She freed her hands from mine and reached diagonally to stroke his cheek. He didn't take his eyes from the road, but he bit his lip and captured her hand and gave it a squeeze. "You take whatever time you need. I'll wait."

"I didn't know what kind of fear you were living with, beloved," he replied, just loud enough for Renny to hear, "I've seen it up close and personal, and I still didn't know until I watched Cory just...die and explode...out of sheer fucking panic. Life's too short and there's too much bad shit that can happen to put it off because I'm afraid."

"It's a big decision." The hope in Renny's voice was painful to hear.

"It's the right one," he murmured, and they were quiet then, the silence in the car heavy with the things they wanted to say privately to one another, and I

wanted to be home so that I could be alone with my fear and my joy and that they could be alone with each other.

When we got home, Max was actually going to heave me up the stairs from the garage, but Arturo, bless his heart, met us and saved Max the trouble.

"You're not that heavy," Max told me wryly, as he shuffled me into Arturo's arms.

"Bullshit," I mumbled. "I outweigh Renny by twenty pounds."

Michelle snorted behind him. "Drug addiction will do that to you."

Arturo turned outraged eyes to her. "Max?" he asked, the veiled threat almost visible in the dark of the garage.

"Oh please, would you?" Max begged, and Arturo obliged by bending forward and catching Michelle's slightly crossed eyes with his own, impossible gaze of copper lightning, until he had her complete attention.

"You are among decent people, woman. You will only say decent things." He turned away from her in disgust and the look he shot Max was weighted with sympathy. Michelle's mouth fell open slightly, and her head bobbed once, and a blessed peace fell.

Arturo's touch didn't feed me either—he was too in love with Grace for that, but he was still Uncle Arturo to me, and he made me feel safe like Max didn't, so I snuggled in to his embrace for a moment, just a moment, of comfort.

"They're okay, Arturo," I murmured.

"I know, Little Goddess," he murmured back, "And the vampires are okay too...they're carpooling home, the lot of them."

"Carpool...?"

"Too tired to fly," he laughed quietly, but I couldn't join him.

"I was so scared," I whispered, "I didn't want to hurt them...if Green hadn't been there, in my head, keeping them safe..."

"He was, Corinne Carol-Anne." My eyes were closed, so I didn't have to see the corridors of home blurring past, but I felt his avuncular kiss on the top of my head. "He was there, and you did what you had to...and now our hill feels

safer, just because you're home."

"I'm tired," I confessed, feeling weak, and then I felt guilty for saying it because Arturo was suddenly glaring into my face, all concern. "It's no big deal..." I protested, "I just need a nap..."

"You just need one of the men," he snapped. "You must be more than tired to even admit it," he grunted then, thinking, and then wheeled out of the sitting room, doing a complete one-eighty and pounding up the granite stairs to the trap door of the Goddess grove, calling behind him for Renny to bring me a blanket.

We came up the trap door and into the garden which was palely glowing in the moonlight. "Will he come, you think?" he asked, sadness in his voice. Adrian had been like a wayward son to Arturo.

"He always comes when I need him." I was certain—I didn't know how I could be, when he didn't come every night, but he was, always was, there in the grove when I needed him.

"Good." Renny came up with the quilt Grace had made me and one of those fuzzy fleece blankets that are always soft, and suddenly I was swathed in covers and stashed on the stone bench memorial, the one with Adrian's face engraved on the side, grateful for the seat cushions I'd conjured after that rough and urgent night with Green.

"I need to leave you alone, Corinne Carol-Anne," Arturo sighed when I was situated. "We have sidhe that need reassurances, and four mortals in the hill..."

"And Green's gone and I'm out of commission. Yeah—go. Thank you for everything." I snuggled deep into the covers, feeling my eyes close, feeling Adrian's presence, breathing through the fragrance of the roses, ripe and plentiful in all of the recent rainfall. I barely felt Arturo's kiss on my cheek and Renny's halting goodbye. I dozed, listening to the sounds of birds and wind and March crickets, until I felt a chill on my forehead and a breeze where there was none. I opened my eyes, and he was there, translucent in the night, spangled blue eyes perpetually sad, and tonight, concerned with me.

"You're weak!" His voice was almost solid with anxiety. "Why are you weak and nobody's here to make you strong?"

I told him, haltingly, letting him hear my panic over Bracken, over Nicky,

my fear of hurting my people, the awe and terror over holding the power of a nova sun. When I finished, I was crying softly, trying not to hiccup, and longing, longing with all my heart that he was real. He had never been warm, but he had been solid, real, flesh around my body, strength to feed me, love. Oh, Goddess, Adrian...why? We all miss you so much, hurt for you so much, why is it that all we have left is the memory of a dream in the garden?

"Shhh..." he whispered as my tears got out of control. "Hush." And his hands made a chill breeze as he brushed my face with them, and I leaned into that because I had nothing else.

When I was calm again I found I had drifted off, and I came to in a panic, afraid he had left. "Still here, luv," he murmured, a little laugh in his transparent voice, "But I was wondering...how weak are you?"

"Not ready to join you yet, beloved," I reassured, because there had been a time not so long ago when I had been a stalled breath away from being his companion here in the garden.

"Good to hear." He grimaced then, and I felt a frustration rolling off of him in breezy waves. "Luv, Bracken's going to have to come up here to get you, right?"

I hadn't thought of that, but, "Yeah—I guess." And I wanted him here, oh Goddess I wanted him here.

"Is it all right if I...if I spend a bit of time getting fuckhead to talk to me, you think?"

A ghost shouldn't have that much yearning. "Of course, beloved," I told him, dammit, drifting off again, "You make him talk to you—of course."

And then my eyes drifted closed again, and Adrian was a presence, a fragrance, a longing in my dreams.

BRACKEN

Unforeseen Ends

"You drive like my grandmother, has anyone told you that?" I complained from the back of Phillip's Lexus. Marcus was driving, because of all the

vampires, Grace and Phillip suffered the most from wielding Cory's power.

"No, and since your grandmother was a tree in Wales who got chopped down around 1800, I know for a fact it's not true." Marcus smiled as he said it, in that perpetually good-willed way that Cory told me was the hallmark of the good high school teacher.

"Well has anyone told you that you drive like *your* grandmother?" I snapped, relieved a little that the Goddess overlooked figures of speech, because right now the cramping and nausea that came with a lie were the last things I wanted.

"Yes, Bracken. You. You've told me that I drive like my grandmother. Right now." And even Marcus' perennial patience was waning. I didn't blame him, not really.

Cory's power had snapped off like a blown fuse and the SUV and I had both plunged unceremoniously into the lake. It was March, after a long snow season, and the water was not warm, and I still could have swum to shore, but that hadn't stopped Marcus from going in after me. While vampires weren't necessarily susceptible to cold and heat, they still registered discomfort, and driving home in wet clothes was probably making him chafe like mad. Add to that the pain and the high they were all feeling from wielding Cory's power, and Marcus was probably the sweetest tempered of the lot of them.

"Seriously—can we go just a little faster?" I begged, not caring that I was pissing him off.

"So help me Bracken, I will pull this car over and make you walk ho..."

"She's weak!" I yelled, feeling helpless, hating it. "She's weak, and we're not there."

Marcus laughed a little. "Well, I hope to heaven she's weak—no one should be able to wield that much power and not feel a little bit woozy, you think?"

"Look, brother, I'm sorry it hurt you..." I started reasonably.

"Don't be," Marcus returned, surprising me. "If it hadn't been you and Nicky, she never would have tried it." He sounded dreamy, and the high of the power was suddenly thick in the car like sweet smoke.

"It was good?" Nicky asked, curious.

"It was fabulous," Phillip said from a raw throat. He'd been pretty much wall-eyed since we'd put him in the car, and it startled me to hear him speak. "It was like...like holding a solar flare when you haven't seen the sun in twenty years..."

"Well I'm sorry you didn't get a chance to finish him off," I finished, subsiding. They were doing their best. It became my mantra for the rest of the trip.

"That's okay, brother," Phillip whispered, and I could see in the dark of the car that he was smiling like a shark dreaming of red water. "She'll wield that through us again. I know she will...oh...Goddess I know it will happen." He shivered, and now the car smelled like incense and sex and I could only pray a cop didn't pull us over because he'd get the totally wrong impression.

"She's okay, isn't she?" Nicky asked beside me, and he sounded young and uncertain so I found myself nodding.

"Yeah. Yeah, Nicky—she's okay...it's just...we weren't there. She woke up and we weren't there, we just left her at the hill..."

"She wasn't at the hill," Marcus murmured, and then did one of those blank faced things that I'd learned long since was a blooded vampire talking to his kiss-mate. "Grace says they were at the parking lot at Denny's, sorting out Renny's love life..." Grace was in another car. As soon as Cory's power faded, every vampire and Avian with keys in their pockets had flown off for the aerie where everyone was parked. They'd been back in minutes to pick us up, but we hadn't loaded into the cars with any sort of order.

"Why would she leave the hill!" Nicky burst out. "The whole reason we left her there was so she'd be safe and strong—what in the blue fuck was she thinking?"

Marcus laughed a little, and shook his head in the rearview mirror. "I bet she was thinking just like the two of you—that her presence was needed to make things right. In any case she just saved your asses, so I wouldn't get on her back about it right now, you think?"

"She's weak," Nicky repeated, looking at me with distress. "We can both feel it. She needs us."

"We'll be there," I said, and pulled Nicky into my arms, where we shivered together for the rest of the interminable journey.

Nicky and I practically ran out of the Lexus while it was still moving and pounded up the outside steps into the living room, where a room full of tense elves looked at us in relief. My mother was suddenly hovering around me, her feet three feet off the ground, her wings invisible because she was buzzing so fast, brushing my face and my back and my chest with a thousand maternal touches. I finally managed to grab her hands and calm her down and give her to my father who gathered her in to his rock-quarry embrace and whispered reassurances to her. "I'm fine," I told them quietly. "I really am fine." I looked around the gathered crowd and didn't see the one face I wanted desperately to see.

"She's in the grove," Arturo said in response to my unasked question, and I had just enough energy to blur up the adamant granite stairs, so I was moving with some serious velocity when I hit the trap door only to have it freeze on me, sending me hurtling back down the stairs, almost into a bewildered Nicky who had the presence of mind to change form as I blew by him. I landed, winded, on my back in the hall, staring up the stairs wondering what in the blue fuck had just happened.

"Uhm," I said, staring up at the ceiling, and Nicky shrieked in alarm. With some deliberation I picked myself up and walked back up the stairs. I grabbed the granite handle, and put my shoulder against the door that was never locked, and pushed, then harder, then frantically as I realized it wasn't going to give.

"Cory?" I called. "Cory, are you all right?"

"She's fine, fuckhead!" said a voice on the other side of the door, and I froze.

In a surprised ruffle of feathers Nicky was standing right next to me. "Was that who I think it was?" he asked, and I had to open and close my mouth a couple of times to dredge up an answer.

"No one," I said, my mouth dry and my gut clenching, "It was nobody." Oh Goddess...not now...do we really have to do this now?

"No one? Fuck you, mate—I was your brother—your lover your *friend* for your whole goddamned life, and now I'm no one?" If I didn't know that it

couldn't exist, I would have said the owner of that voice was hurt—and enjoying getting a little back. I swallowed against the anger and betrayal that thought brought on, and tried appealing to reason.

"Cory...Cory—could you let me in?" I begged, and was relieved to hear her strained and muffled voice from somewhere above me.

"I'd love to, Bracken," she called, weakly, "but it's not my call."

I hit the door with my shoulder again, and pain shivered down to my neck and elbow because, dammit, the door was made of granite. "Fuck it all, open the door!"

"I'm not holding it closed, Brack..." She sounded distressed, and I hit the door again, feeling my flesh give and my shoulder creak.

"Then who is!" Damn, that last charge would have shattered me if I were human, and I felt a sense of urgency grip me. She was up there and she was *weak* and he...it...something wasn't letting me in.

"I am!"

"You don't exist!" I shouted childishly, but I couldn't help it and I charged the door again.

"Bracken you're hurting yourself!" she said, and there were the tears in her voice and I started pounding the door frantically even as the voice said, "He's hurting us all! Damned stubborn rock pile of a brain, I don't exist, do I?"

"You didn't love us enough to stay!" I shouted, and lost all track of the pain in my shoulder and the pain in my chest and I charged the door until my bones shattered and re-knit and blood started pouring down from the round of my shoulder where my flesh split but still I hit that damned granite door again and again and again, calling to Cory, and to the Goddess, and to everyone but the owner of that voice, that Goddess-blighted, smug and sorrowful voice on the other side of the door, until the skin of my arm and my collarbone ran warm with blood for the second time that night, and my neck and collar snapped in protest and I was forced to my knees in pain and despair for a moment to let it heal. She needed me. She needed me and I wasn't there and he wasn't either, not really, not the way she needed us and how dare he keep me from her when he couldn't be there the way I could, how dare he be there when he'd left us, left me, and I'd had to live with that hole in my heart for months and pretend it didn't exist so that I

could love her with a heart that felt whole. "Please..." I begged again, feeling my pride seep out of me with my sweat. "Please don't lock me out."

"You started it, jackass!" And that snapped my temper and melted my resistance because fuck it all, it wasn't true.

"The hell I did!" I shouted, pounding the door futilely with my fist until it too ran dark and crimson not caring that half the hill, Chloe and Max and my parents included, was gathered at the foot of the staircase, listening to me talking to someone who shouldn't exist. "You DIED, asshole—do you remember that? You left ME! My whole damn life I was terrified of leaving you behind and then you go and leave me? How dare you? How dare you come back here and listen to her and comfort her when the one thing that kept me whole this last year is that at least we didn't make her choose..." I was sobbing. The kind of sobs that men, even sidhe, don't like to admit they have, when their chests heave and their tears flow and their noses run. "You left me, Adrian." My momentum faded, and abruptly I was the little boy in the garden, begging to fly, except, this time, Adrian simply kissed my cheek and disappeared into the dark without me.

"How could you leave me?" I finished, wiping my face with my bloody hand. There was a terrible pause, and then the trap door creaked open, and after a heavy moment I heaved myself to my feet and went through the door.

He was waiting for me on the other side, shaking his translucent head, bloody see-through tears coursing down his pale cheeks. "You really messed yourself up, mate," he murmured, gesturing to my bloody shoulder.

"I repeat," I said, trying for dignity, "You started it."

Adrian was about to reply when Cory made a sound and struggled over to me on unsteady legs. She reached out to touch my shoulder just as her knees buckled and I had to catch her before she went down.

"You're hurt!" she said, breaking, her hands fluttering around my shoulder. I was still buzzing with Green's power, and the cuts and cracked flesh were starting to heal already, as they had been during my frenzied pounding at the door, but she turned a face streaming with tears to me.

"You're weak!" I returned, trying to distract her, but she bit her lip and shook her head and put her hands on my chest, pressing what was left of my wet sweatshirt against my still tender skin and feeling, I realized, for the giant wound

that had healed under Grace's hands a little more than an hour before. She held her palms up to me, sticky with watered blood that I was no longer shedding, and a sob caught at her throat.

"You were hurt," she repeated in a whisper and she leaned her cheek against my chest, smearing my blood across her cheek, her chin, and her hair. She shivered there in my arms, and I met Adrian's sympathetic gaze. He was growing less substantial even as I looked at him, and I wondered at that, and at what strength of will he must have to stay here for us, to feel our need for his company and to manifest here, where he could feel us love him. How many nights had he come here, knowing I missed him, only to have me deny his existence?

"I left you," he said quietly after a long moment of me reading his misery in his transparent eyes, "Because you could survive it. You're strong, Bracken. I was only ever as strong as the people I loved. You're stronger for them—it makes a difference."

"I miss you," I said nakedly, having nothing else. "I miss playing chess and beating the hell out of each other. I miss a thousand things we did that had nothing to do with making love and everything to do with being with my brother." I stopped, and thought, what the hell—I was already baring my soul. "I miss knowing if we could have shared her, loved her together...I think it would have worked." I shifted her in my arms as she whimpered a little, and felt her hand come up to touch my cheek.

"Of course it would have worked, mate," Adrian said gently, dropping an almost invisible kiss on the top of her head, so close to me I could feel the chill of where his flesh should be. "We're bound together, the lot of us. You don't abandon the people you love because they love the people you love."

Cory snarked, her breath feathering against my throat and then I laughed against my will and even Adrian smiled. "I thought ghosts were supposed to be wise," I said dryly.

"I'm very wise." He flashed an extended fang with the insouciance I remembered, then passed a disintegrating hand in front of his face with a pained expression. "I'm just not that coherent." He moved his transparent gaze to meet mine, and the light moment was gone. "I died twice and my love is still enough to keep me here, Bracken Brine. You may be pissed at me, but please, my brother, honor that."

I closed my eyes and swallowed, and managed to dredge up an unlikely smile of brotherhood. "I've always honored you, Adrian. You never knew how much."

I don't know what he would have said next because at that exact moment a dying sprite appeared right over us, to drop, exhausted in Cory's lap even as I held her. She caught the tiny body, like the child of a hummingbird and star shine as it fell and her shocked grief was heard in her indrawn breath. She leaned forward, cupping the sprite as it murmured something in a tiny voice like the buzzing of wings and then, even as its light dimmed she let out an anguished cry.

"No. No no no no no no...oh Bracken..." she wailed, burrowing into me for a comfort she could never find, even as she cupped the still, dark body carefully in her hand. "Its Davy's sprite...he got her Bracken, Davy's dead."

And I looked to Adrian, my brother, my lover, my friend, for help dealing with this one crisis that I didn't know if I could share, and Adrian gave me a look of profound sorrow, even as he disappeared.

I held her. I held her until I felt her shivering with the cold, with reaction, with shock, and then I took her downstairs, where we were surrounded by our people who didn't know what happened. I caught Arturo's eye and he cleared the bottom of the stairs, pausing only when Cory looked up from my chest and said, "Nicky?"

Nicky stopped and came towards her, and she held her hands out to his face, his shoulders, his chest, all sheathed in tattered clothing with a few healing wounds. She gave him the same fluttering motions she'd given me. "You're okay?" she asked, holding his face in her hands. He closed his eyes and wobbled a little, and I knew he was feeling the same pull I was, holding her in my arms. She was pulling strength from us in giant gulps of skin-on-skin.

"I'm fine," he assured, taking her hands in his and kissing them with enough tenderness to make me swallow. "You?"

"Davy's dead," she whispered. My mother drew near and I nodded at her to take the tiny body from Cory's hand. "I failed her. But you're okay...you're okay. You and Bracken are okay..." she trailed off and leaned her head against my chest again, pulling her hands in towards her chest while Nicky met my eyes helplessly.

"Goddess..." he muttered, "Take her to bed, Bracken. Feed her. Green will be here soon."

It was a good plan and I followed it, undressing her, kissing her human skin with its red-brown freckles, watching her close her eyes as though each kiss was too exquisite to bear. We showered, washing the blood off of my body, the blood I'd smeared on her hair just to hold her, and when we were dry I kissed her, trying to still the dry sobbing breaths she hadn't stopped taking. Her touch on my flesh felt like frantic, felt like panic, felt like grief, and even as I moved inside her, the holy dark crashing over the two of us and taking us under then over in an explosion of stars and pleasure/pain, I knew she was checking me, making sure my body was whole, making sure I wouldn't leave her. Her every touch was a blessed silken cord, binding me to her side like Adrian's soul was bound to Green's hill.

When we were done we lay, silently, face to face, and her eyes shimmered in the dark and I reached out and touched her wet cheek, singing softly, *don't cry anymore, you are not alone, don't cry anymore, my baby.*

"Pretty words," she said, capturing my palm against her cheek and planting a kiss in the center. "Go to sleep, beloved."

"You're not okay yet," I yawned through half-closed eyes.

"You can't fix that tonight, Bracken Brine," she murmured. "Sleep." And it was almost like she'd put power in her voice because that was the last thing I remember.

CORY

Finishing Techniques

Long after Bracken fell asleep I lay, watching his face in the dark. Sometimes I saw him whole and unblemished as he was here, under my hands, each puff of breath a burst of invisible white in the purple space of our room; sometimes he was mangled and dying under my hands, on the floor of the shield I'd tortured our people to create. The sweatshirt and jean jacket he'd taken off to make love to me had been shredded and still damp and bloody. I prayed somebody or something would clear it before we woke in the morning.

Sometimes I didn't see him at all. Instead, I saw Davy, alone and distraught, sitting on a football bench in the gray, so confused she couldn't even move to get out of the rain.

Apparently Green defied radar to fly home in the Cadillac, because after about an hour he slid in behind me and I didn't even hesitate to turn towards him. We came together in the shadows, and I welcomed him inside of me, praying, praying that he would help ease the confusion, the pain, the panic, and the grief. But when it was over, and he held himself above me, shrinking from my body as we trembled in aftermath, he looked into my eyes, his clean, alien profile ghosting in the faint light, and knew that it hadn't.

"I can't heal you when you blame yourself, luv," he whispered. His eyes, so green they were even emerald in the dark, glistened faintly. I was hurting him. I didn't want to hurt him.

"I know...I'm sorry...I'm so sorry..." And the tears were coming again and I put a mental boot heel on my emotions and ground them back into my gut. "I'm sorry, Green," I said, hoping I sounded mature and in control, "I'll deal with it. I promise I will."

He smoothed my hair back from my face unhappily, and sighed. "You don't have to be brave with me," he said, and I nodded.

"She was mine, Green," I said. "She wasn't yours to protect, she was mine and I don't want to burden you with this."

"Luv..." He would have pressed it. I half wanted him to press it, but at the same time I knew that if he did I would yell at him, I would say awful, human, venomous things to him that I didn't mean and I couldn't do that to Green, not my Green whom I loved more than life. I couldn't burden him with my anger, with my blame. This wasn't a grief we shared, not like Adrian. This was my failure, my stupidity, and I wouldn't place it in his hands.

"Go to sleep, beloved," I ordered gently. He smelled like sylphs and sex and I was pretty sure he had taxed himself to the extreme to help me while he was busy working sylph magic and then taking a three hour drive in one and a half to come to me. "Go to sleep—I'll be better in the morning, I promise."

"If you're not," he said, rolling over to my other side and wrapping his arms securely around me, "I'll call Hallow."

"No you won't," I said with certainty. He wouldn't call Hallow—not when he could help me himself.

Only a little later Nicky crawled in behind Green, and I pretended to be asleep as he passed his hands over my face and kissed me over Green's shoulder, then settled down to sleep.

I couldn't sleep. My brain was a giant puppy chasing its own tail; it was a worm ouroboros devouring its problems and regenerating what should have been eaten...it was an endless cycle of all of the ways I had royally fucked up and could not redeem myself.

Green. Bracken. Nicky. Vampires. Davy. Green (I was trying please Green am I doing okay why aren't you home so I know if I'm doing okay Green don't let me let you down...) Bracken (obscene hole in his chest, his power pulling blood that poured through the shield into the water, battering the trap door and baring his broken heart for all of us to hear...) Nicky (loving me enough to leave if I wanted him to but I didn't want him to I loved him I loved him but not like I loved Green and Bracken and was that fair but I wanted him here dammit please don't take him away) Vampires (do it, Cory, do it, flood us with sunshine but what if you die? Do it, order us lead us we'll do it please do it kill us if you have to but lead us we need you we need you we need you ..) Davy (don't want to...) Davy (don't want to...) Davy (don't want to don't want to think about Davy don't want to remember her desolate, forlorn, bereft, doubting her beloved doubting me doubting herself Davy did you know the sprites were watching would you have mourned them when they died for you Davy did you know your boyfriend was a vampire that I am more than human that the world was full of magic or did you die alone did you die confused did you die in terror did you die in the dark not seeing the sprites I had at least sent to keep you company...)

Green Bracken Nicky Vampires Davy
GreenBrackenNickyVampiresDavybrackennickyvampiresdavy and around and around and around andaroundandaroundandaround and oh Goddess make it stop make it stop make my mind stop make it stop what did I do what can I do what can anybody do to keep their lovers safe to keep their people safe to keep their friends safe from the bad guys from their ignorance even from themselves...

Ad Nausea. At four in the morning I sat up in bed and wiggled out from all those lovely, loving male bodies to take a shower. I thought briefly about walking into the kitchen and getting something to eat, but the vampires were out

there and I'd almost killed the vampires trying to defend my lovers and I didn't want to deal with them right now...

I turned on the little light next to the bed and pulled out my knitting. It was wonderful—so peaceful, so ordered. There was something hypnotic about the stitches, something lovely and peaceful and perfect. It was a light worsted weight yarn, which meant I was working on a gazillion stitches for Green my beautiful sidhe lover, and I needed to work on it, needed to hurry up and finish it, give him my token, my sweat and my tears and my soul and it was lovely, so lovely, to make a stitch and another and know each stitch was perfect and there was no bad answer and no bad decision to making the next stitch.

Eventually the men woke up. They looked at me—I didn't see them, but I could hear their eyes colliding—and then they looked at each other and then they nodded to Green. Bracken went into the shower and Nicky left the room for his shower, and Green crouched at my feet. "How long have you been up?" he asked hesitantly.

"Not long," I said pleasantly. I looked up from my perfect ordered stitches and smiled a little. My eyes were blurring, his lovely clean face losing its lines and muddling into a pale, shining halo and I should have taken the opportunity to stretch my neck and my hands but my knitting was so pleasant and calm and it called me and the potential for disaster in Green's sad emerald eyes was endless.

"Have you eaten?" he asked.

I worked my cable needle and shook my head. "MmmmNnn," I murmured the negative, not really hearing him, "I'll get something later." Stitch stitch cable 3 back stitch stitch stitch purl two stitch...Green left the room, Bracken came out of the shower, something about going to eat that I didn't hear but said no to anyway, and still my hands moved. My neck ached, my shoulders were cramping, my hands were cramping but the next stitch called and the next and the next.

I looked up at one point and there was a plate with breakfast on it, sausage which Nicky must have made because it nauseated the elves to even cook meat, and I couldn't remember who had brought it in. Shortly after that Renny padded in and nibbled at my sausage with delicate carnivore teeth and I was so grateful for her in this form that I relaxed my hand and pet her, my muscles spasming into her fur, then I set the knitting on my lap for a minute and pet her some more, allowing her purr to resonate on my legs and through my feet and it felt

wonderful. She licked my face with her sandpaper tongue and curled up around my feet again and my knitting called.

I looked up to see her eating a plate of pasta, stopping every so often to lick the sauce off her whiskers and wondered who had brought that in. When I looked up again she was gone and so was the food and my head pounded and my eyes felt like they'd been sandpapered and I turned back towards my knitting and the next thing I knew someone was forcibly pulling it out of my hands.

I sprang to my feet and tried to fight back but my shoulder picked that moment to seize and then my calves did that charlie-horse thing and in a massive scrunch-twang of agony my body arched back in one big tight bow-string of a cramp. I let out a whimper through a dry throat and fell awkwardly back to the chair and wondered how long it had been since I'd taken a drink of water or even spoken or swallowed and then rounded in on whoever had taken my yarn and my needles from my hands.

"Dammit, Green, I said in a minute!" I snarled, fighting upright through the cramping, reaching for my work, and the hand that blocked my grab was not gentle as it closed in on mine. A sense of rough peace seeped through my fingers, of sweet sweet healing, and I realized that I hadn't stretched in too long a time. How long had I sat here, hunched over my knitting, as my muscles screamed in pain unheard?

"You need to eat, Corinne Carol-Anne," he snapped, and my full name falling from his lips whipped me into myself for a moment.

"I'm fine," I said with an attempt at a smile. It hurt. My whole face hurt—my forehead, my cheeks, my neck. I wobbled on my feet because my muscles were seizing and tried to keep my balance and focus my eyes. "Really, beloved. I just need to clear my head. I'll be out in a few minutes."

Green swallowed hard and nodded. His eyes looked odd, and I realized they were red-rimmed, as though he were exhausted or grieving or worried. His hair was pulled back in a rough queue and looked as though he'd been dragging fingers through it, and I wondered what else had happened to make him look so ragged. "Grace wants to know if you're weaving in your ends or just tying them in knots," he said out of the blue.

"Tying them into knots..." And then I caught myself. "When did you talk to Grace?"

"Just now, before I came in," he said slowly, as though that would mean something.

I scrubbed my face with my hands, trying to orient myself. "What time is it?" I asked blearily.

"Twelve a.m." I blinked again, hard, trying to clear my vision. He looked angry. Bitterly, furiously angry, and I started to worry.

"Impossible." I tried to laugh this off too. "I wasn't here very lon..." And I broke off because he grabbed my shoulder with one hand and my chin with the other and was forcing me to focus in on his face. I blinked hard because I could barely do it.

"Twenty hours, Corinne Carol-Anne," he rasped. "Twenty hours you've sat there in that chair and tried to kill yourself over sticks and string, and I want to know why."

"I'm fine!" I protested. Jeez, talk about being overprotective! "I was just..."

"Tying things into knots," he snapped.

"I'm fine," I said again, and my body screamed in the pain of enforced position and I squinted at him, the light from the little lamp suddenly too dim. For a brief flashing moment I wondered if the Goddess were punishing me for something as I reached creakily for the ceiling, desperately trying to chill my body out.

"Fuck it all, Cory, if you say that one more goddamned time I'm going to ship you off to Hallow's with your knitting as a gag," Green was saying, and his eyes were crackling, literal emerald sparks that looked like rabid fireflies. "You...you can't even see yourself right now—you're unhinged. You were catatonic for nearly an entire day, and now you're telling me you're fine?"

I didn't hear the second half of what he was saying. I was still stuck on that first part.

"You can't send me away, Green." Where did that voice wobble come from? "I'll do better, I promise!" He couldn't send me away. "It's just...I'm sorry I'm not strong enough when you're gone." I nodded, trying to get him to agree with me, but he was just looking at me with those red rimmed eyes, and an

unbearable sadness, and he was going to do it, he was going to send me away, he was going to leave me again..."You can't leave me again!" More wobble—even some wailing in that one, and I tried, oh I tried to get my voice, my face, my body under control. "You can't make me go, beloved," I begged, "I know I screwed up...I almost let Bracken die, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry...please don't go...please don't make me go...I'm lost without you, Green...I know I said I'd be okay, but I'm so lost, and I feel like a kid left home alone and I said it would be okay but now I'm scared...I'll try to do better beloved but you can't g...you can't gggg..."

Oh, God, I was going to lose it. I couldn't lose it, Green depended on me. The whole hill depended on me. How could I be an almighty leader one moment and a mewling baby the next? I would control it, I would I would I would...

"You can't GOOOOOOOOOOO..." I had never tried to hold sobs like this back, and they hurt, they ripped, they destroyed on their way out and Green's arms came around me and he picked me up to him, in that way I bitched about but I really treasured and it was a good thing too because I felt too weak to stand once I started crying. Relief, blessed blessed healing seeped into my back and my shoulders and my head and my ears and my body let me know under no uncertain terms that the day had been one long misery that I'd never acknowledged.

Green moved to sit on the bed, and leaned back moving his hand through my hair and whispering tired, quiet reassurances, until I could breathe again. We sat there, for the longest time when I was done, playing games with restless fingers.

"Oh Goddess," I murmured. "Can you forgive me?"

"Can you forgive me?" he asked his hands moving my hair out of my face as he looked seriously at me.

I blinked. "For what?"

"I left you, Cory. You said it again and again and again...I left you here and you felt overwhelmed and like you had to lead the hill alone."

He looked so sad. "There's nothing to forgive," I murmured to our twined hands.

"Don't lie to me," he growled, the anger taking us both by surprise. I

looked up again, and thought he looked more than sad, he looked exhausted and worried and I realized *I* had done that. I had made his eyes red-rimmed with tears and tiredness and frustration.

"I'm sorry," I said miserably, reaching up to touch his face. "I'm sorry I'm not as strong as I thought." I had been so sure I could do this—so sure I could make him proud of me. "I'm sorry I need you and that I fuck everything up when you're not here. I'm sorry. I shouldn't be mad, Green. We talked about this in December and I knew it was coming and I should have been okay...I shouldn't be mad at you and my head knows that it's stupid but I think about you walking away one more time and I just want to...to beat the shit out of you and that's not mature or grown up or even rational...but I can't keep them all safe by myself and I need you...I'm sorry...I'm so sorry..."

"Sh..." he soothed. "It's not your fault." He smiled, just a little, and the crinkle at his eyes made him look young and whole and well and I rubbed my cheek against his chest like a cat. "It's okay—you know..." A laugh came out, and it wasn't the laugh I loved from Green, with an open mouth and an open heart. It was a closed laugh, with pain, and bitterness and it hurt me. "When I walk away from you I want to kick the hell out of the whole world. But that's us, luv...that's because we don't like being apart...it makes us...or me, at least, want to blame something for the hurt. And...and there will be no more trips for now, but...but we're going to have to live with them in the future, okay?"

I whimpered. Gees I'm a total pussy. He needed me to tell him it was okay, but I whine at him instead. I tried again. "O...ooo...ok..."

His laugh this time was real, and it warmed me to my toes. "Don't hurt yourself, Corinne Carol-Anne." He laughed, and I laughed too, a free laugh this time but the laughter faded and we squeezed each other at the end of it.

"We'll have to work on it," he said after a moment, "But what you must accept now, right this moment, is that you haven't let anybody down." I made a negative sound in my throat but he shook his head at me. "In fact," he murmured, "You did just fine. You keep talking about screwing up—beloved, you kept them all safe."

"But Bracken..." Oh that hurt to think about.

"Is safe and whole, because of you." He rubbed my back absently and I relaxed into that touch, feeling again the healing in the tortured muscles at my

neck and shoulders. "The Hollow Man almost got him—and Nicky—but you saved them. There's nothing to apologize for."

"Nicky was talking about moving out!" I said indignantly, and Green laughed.

"As though we'd let him do that," he murmured.

"We need him," I nodded, wanting the reassurance that Nicky wouldn't leave me too.

"Damned straight."

"I could have killed the vampires." I was angry at myself all over again for this.

"Impossible," Grace said from surprisingly close, and I looked up, startled. She had just slammed the door open and was coming in with a tray of food, and when I looked beyond her to the doorway I saw Bracken and Nicky and Arturo and half the vampires and the other half of the hill. Had they all been there, listening, as I had an emotional supernova? I almost whimpered with mortification.

"We didn't know..." I hid my face in Green's chest.

Grace bent down so I had to look at her. "We did know, Cory," she said gently, her freckled cheeks wrinkling with a gentle smile. She sat the tray down on the end table and patted at Green so he'd make room. "Those of us who'd tasted your blood...we knew. We knew you couldn't hurt us—not with Green inside you."

"I did hurt you." I felt them again, at the end, grimacing with the pain of my power, before I'd been forced to withdraw.

"And then you stopped." Her hand, cold and compassionate, touched my sweaty face. "We're okay, Cory. And I've got to tell you, the unblooded vampires are going to be hammering down your door from here on out because they are mighty impressed. And it doesn't hurt that Phillip can't stop talking about it like it was taking blood while having sex hovering seventy feet in the air," Grace snorted, then she stood, long, lanky and capable, and I had a sudden wish that her daughter could see her like this. "I've brought you food—both of you." She glared at Green, and I touched his face again. So worried. He looked so worried.

"You're going to eat every last damned bite, and you're going to let Bracken and Nicky in before they gnaw at the carpet in frustration, and..." She looked at me with a mother's look, a look of frustrated love, "And you, my dear, are going to cut yourself a fucking break, okay?"

I nodded. So much easier to say than do.

"Good." She nodded decisively, then gestured for Bracken and Nicky to come in.

Bracken reached me first, and bent a hesitant kiss to my lips, then stepped back and peered tentatively into my eyes. He looked like hell—panda shadow eyes red-rimmed like Green's, handsome, grim mouth flat and narrow with tension. And a terrible hesitation to him, as though afraid of what he'd find in my eyes when I looked at him.

"What?" I said, unsure of what he wanted.

"Do you know me?" he asked, and I was confused and looked at him. "You didn't know me this afternoon." He took one of my hands as I cuddled into Green. "You didn't know any of us. You didn't look up, you didn't talk, you didn't answer...you just sat there and stared your hands."

"I'm sorry," I said again. I took his hand, then reached for Nicky, and he squeezed between the end table and the bed, where Bracken wouldn't fit and took my other hand. "I'm sorry, both of you. I was just..." My voice sharpened, "You assholes *left* me, when I was sleeping, and then you almost died!" I looked at Bracken, accusing, "And you hurt yourself, trying to get to Adrian..." I was going to supernova again and I was too tired, I didn't have the reserves left to flare, "And how am I supposed to protect you if you don't stay with me?" I had left Davy, alone and sad and she was dead.

"And how are we supposed to take care of you if you don't take care of yourself?" Bracken asked, frustrated. "How could you not know me?"

"I knew you," I murmured, stretching up from my position in Green's arms to stroke his short hair because I was feeling bad all over again, "How could I not know you? I just...put off dealing with you, that's all."

"Well deal with us now." Bracken pouted, nudging Green who scooted again so he could flop over on the bed. Nicky leapt across us, startling everybody, and landed, light as the bird he'd channeled, on our other side.

"What do you want me to say? Besides I'm hungry that is..." I looked hopefully at Bracken who handed me the sandwich Grace had left, and then gave Green his.

Bracken let us eat for a moment in silence, and then pointed to the elephant at the room and screamed 'look, it's a big gray thing!'

"Davy," he stated, and I almost choked on my sandwich.

"My problem," I garbled, and then Green smacked me in the back of the head. On purpose. I swallowed in surprise and glared at him. "You hit me!"

"Let's try that again," he replied evenly, as though Green, the most patient man I've ever known, hadn't just tagged me in the back of the head like a mother would smack a wayward adolescent reaching for a cookie.

"My fault," I said again, and he shook his head and moved his hand back to make me duck.

"You get one more chance, and then I'm calling Hallow up at dark-thirty in the fucking night and dragging him up here."

"I thought you were going to send me down..."

He closed his eyes in pain. "You, beloved, Corinne Carol-Anne—you of all people should know that was an empty threat. The Goddess herself would have to pry you from my cold dead hands to get you off my hill. Now let's try this again. She's not your fault. Her death is not your fault. She was Kyle's to take care of, and he left himself vulnerable, and it's still not his fault."

"You didn't see her, Green," I said after a really long pause when the sandwich lost the—wich part and I still kept eating, "She was so lost. We completely blew apart her world, and destroyed her faith in everything and...then he got her anyway."

Bracken was lying on his stomach, so he could watch me eat I guess, and he nudged my leg and frowned up at me. "Your little human would have been okay," he said after a moment, "Why did you like her?"

"Uhm..." (chew chew chew, think about the question, chew some more) "She didn't ask questions...she just...I don't know...accepted me and liked me, that was all."

"I could point out, luv, that this is exactly why we like you." Green's pale, attenuated fingers pushed the hair out of my eyes, and I found myself smiling at him with silly eyes and a loose mouth. He liked me. All the ways I felt I had screwed up, and he still loved me, still wanted me here. Out of nowhere the roiling of the sacred dark crashed into my loins like tide, then receded, leaving a cleansed slate of sleep sand in its wake. I took a deep breath and tried to pull my thoughts back to Davy, back to pain, but whereas the night before I had begged both Green and Bracken to make love to me to block those things out, right now I simply wanted Green because he was all that was not pain. He made me happy and I wanted him. I breathed in again, felt my whole tight, angry body simply melt against Green's chest, his arms, his thighs, and for the first time since his return I let him comfort me, I let him be my strength, my backbone, my grief and my healing.

"Mmmmm..." I murmured, suddenly sleepy and pleasantly aroused at once.

"I could point out that that's why I like you guys too." I didn't want to move. The hand holding the rest of my sandwich rested limply in my lap, and a foggy part of me wanted to finish it and then make wild furious passionate love to any one of the three men on my bed, but most of me was simply content to hum with desire and put that other thing off until later. Gently, Bracken took the sandwich from my hand, and Green moved me so that Brack could shuck my jeans from my hips. A quick flip and a little maneuvering, and my bra went with my jeans, and then I was set between Bracken and Green, and their hands were mesmerizing, quietly relaxing on my body, and they were both touching me and if I'd stopped to think about it I would have realized that Green had powered me into sleep, but that was okay, because apparently I was too dumb to give my brain a rest on it's own, and besides: they were taking care of me. They were feeding me power and strength and love and that's what we did for each other, and sometimes you're on the receiving end, and that was something I had to get used to.

So I fell asleep pleasantly horny, and woke up unpleasantly hungry. I tried to slither out of the puppy pile unnoticed again, but Bracken woke up immediately and put a heavy hand on my arm as I was half-way to the bottom of the bed.

"I'm starving," I confessed, hoping that he'd be thrilled that I was eating and stay away from the emotional stuff for a while.

"I'll get it," he rumbled, and we both wriggled, sans dignity, to the bottom of the bed and stood up, looking anxiously to Green and Nicky who were on the outside edge to make sure they hadn't woken up.

"But..." I could get my own food, right?

"The vampires were still buzzing about you when we came to bed," he said, arching his eyebrows at me. "Quite frankly, I don't think you're up to being Lady Cory tonight."

I sat down abruptly on the bottom edge of the bed. The sprites liked to do my sheets in watercolor abstracts, and this set was different shades of rose on an aged green—it was one of my favorites, and I stroked it restlessly before looking up. "Yeah," I said after a moment, "You're probably right." I couldn't look at him — it hurt to admit.

"Back in a minute." And I barely heard the door close behind him.

With a small sigh I stood and stretched my fingertips towards the ten-foot ceiling and moved to the chairs where my knitting was. I didn't want to work on it—no, after my marathon of self-denial, I could probably wait a day before I worked on it again—but I did want to see it. The fibers were wool, cotton, silk, and cashmere—the blend itself was magical, but touching it with my hands was like touching love—and I had done the yarn proud. I had nearly finished the front in one day, and it was some of my best knitting ever—the stitches were flawlessly even, the cables perfectly executed.

I seriously considered ripping the whole thing out.

Bracken had said he could feel my love in his sweater—would Green be more sensitive? Would he be able to feel the pain I'd denied as I worked on it? Would the butter-soft fibers score his chest and make him remember that I was weak, and worried, and difficult? Would his fine green-pale skin chafe under my personal flaws as a human's wouldn't under the perfect knitting?

I was a silk-strand away from pulling the needles out and yanking on the yarn when Bracken came back in and said, repressed panic and all, "Cory? You're not..."

I dropped the knitting abruptly on the maple end-table. "No," I said through a dry throat. "I'm not knitting again." I pulled my knees up to my chest, squashing my body sideways into the over-stuffed brocade. Bracken set the tray

on the end table and handed me a sandwich, then sat down besides me, on the floor, and rested his head against my hip.

"Then what are you thinking?" he asked gently.

I looked at Nicky who was on the edge of the bed, and at Green, right behind him. Both men were lying on their stomachs, their arms stretched above their heads, their faces turned towards me. The shadows illuminated the lines of their muscles down their upper arms, the droop of their lashes on their cheeks, the hollows of their under-arms as they met slim-muscled torsos—Green's was smooth and bare, Nicky had a patch of cinnamon colored hair. Green was propped up a little on his side, and his sand-colored nipple was almost more visible in the dark than it was in the light. Nicky's chin was gruff with stubble, and Green's hair in the darkness was the brightness of a lemon cookie. Their features were slack and sweet in sleep, and my heart was suddenly tied up into a little tiny knot.

"I'm thinking..." I swallowed and cleared my throat. "I'm thinking what I'm always thinking—that love makes us strong and vulnerable all at the same time."

"Mmmm." His hand came up to my knee, and he leaned a little more, using his arm as support.

"I'm also..." This was always hard to put into words. "I'm also thinking that I can't imagine what it must be like to be Green, and to open my heart up again and again for such a long time, only to have it broken by the inevitable."

"It's frightening, isn't it?"

I shuddered and wiped my fingers on my T-shirt so I could stroke his silky dark hair. I had known it was a birthright when he'd first cut it, trying to prove something to me. I hadn't known that to the European fey, at least, it signified immortality. When he'd cut it again, after he'd been bound to my lifespan, I had cried for two days.

"It's terrifying," I whispered, trying to put a finger on the feeling that had gripped me for the last few months, the thing that had driven me to keep our people safe, to risk myself for Bracken and Green in ways that frightened them. I searched hard for an analogy, went back to high school, to poor, beleaguered Vicki Morrison who'd found herself pregnant at fifteen, and until she and the

baby had been taken into foster care, I'd been the only one to talk to her. "It's like...like I held my friend's baby once," I said into the quiet, "And it was all good, you know?" An understatement—it had been breathtaking, like holding thunder. "The kid was cute, waving her tiny little fist with the fat perfect fingers, and those unfocused eyes were all crossed and everything...and suddenly it hit me that I drop shit all the time, right? I drop my purse, I drop my back pack, my wallet...whatever...but this...this perfect little creature...she owed her whole existence on the gamble that I wouldn't drop *her*." I shuddered again, and my fingers tightened in his hair and I grabbed his shoulder instead. "You didn't know me, Brack." I couldn't even look at him when I confessed this. "I was such a bitch in high school, so afraid that friendship—any friendship—would just suck me down into loserdom. I was such a bitch to Adrian when we first met. And now you and Green and Nicky love me and..."

"And you're afraid you're going to drop the baby," Bracken murmured, his hand stroking my knee.

"I had to give her back to my friend, like, right then." I remembered that, because it had hurt to give her back. It had been terrifying, but sweet. I shook my head. "I can't give you guys back. I *refuse* to give you back, Bracken." I closed my eyes, seeing them, all of them, breathing in the quietude, sleeping in the shadows, their hearts beating for me. "But holding on to you all scares me to the hairs on tops of my toes, every goddamned day."

"If you think it's any different for us, beloved, you're sadly mistaken," Bracken murmured.

"Which baby did you ever drop?" I asked, and it heartened me to hear that puff of breath that signified laughter.

I guess he had no answer to that because he changed the subject and reached for my knitting instead. "You did a good job while you were being a complete psychopath. What are all these little ends sticking out though? There weren't any of those in my sweater." His fingers flexed in the delicious cream colored yarn.

"That's because I wove them in," I said dryly. "You're supposed to do it as you finish off the yarn—I don't."

"So that's what Grace meant—are you weaving in your ends or tying knots?" I murmured affirmative and he stroked the fabric again. "Why don't you

do them as you go?"

I shrugged, took the knitting from him and tucked it safely in my bag. "I don't know...I just like to...touch the finished product, say good-bye to it...I can do that if I take an hour when I'm done and weave in all the ends."

Bracken made a non-committal sound in the darkness, and I felt myself nodding off. So I was not ready, I was exposed and unprepared, when he suddenly said, "Davy. You need to weave in your ends with her."

Abruptly I was awake, and without warning I was in tears. I wasn't fighting them, they came freely, and I was somewhat surprised to find that they didn't hurt when you didn't fight them. I'm so stupid sometimes—how many times did I have to cry to learn this lesson? Still..."That wasn't fair, Brack," I complained thickly, wiping my face with my hands, and still they kept coming. He sat up and wrapped his arm around my back, and I leaned my cheek against his hair. "I wasn't ready." My breath caught on a sob, and he waited, patiently, but I breathed it out and thought I was done.

"We're never ready, beloved," he whispered, stroking my hair, "but she's gone—you know it. We'll find out how, and if Kyle survives we'll help him. But you need to grieve."

"Remember that night at the Chevron station?" Like I said, not one of our best moments. "That old man died and you told me 'It's more mete that other's grieve'. Remember? You phrased it so old-fashioned...it stuck in my head...I just keep thinking..." Oh Goddess, I was hiccupping with the effort to hold it together and to keep my sorrow civilized, and his arm tightened around my back and he took my tear-puddled hand in his and kissed it. "I just keep thinking that she's not mine to grieve for...she's got friends and family and people who have known her for years, and I just ran around the track with her—she didn't even know who I was..."

"Shhh...sh...sh..." He rose to his knees and gathered me in close, and whispered things in my hair. "If you grieve because you'll miss her, then she's yours to grieve for," he murmured, "but if it's only guilt...well, then, deal with the guilt..."

"I'll miss her...I'll miss her...I'll..." And then it was gone, that barrier in my chest, that tough I've-got-everything-under-control-and-every-emotion-in-a-box blockade, and I wept freely and quietly for my friend. When I was done, and

Bracken was mopping my face with my T-shirt, I said, "She never got to hear me sing." Because it was a talent I was particularly proud of, but too shy to share. "Would it be okay if I sang for her?"

Bracken nodded and kissed my forehead. "I think it would be perfect," he said, and his throat sounded rough. I'd put them through a lot this last day, I thought dismally.

"Would you sing with me? Would Green?" Bracken nodded, and we both looked towards Green, his eyes closed, his chest moving in and out in the silence of sleep—or so we thought.

"I'd love to sing with you beloved," he said dryly, opening his lovely green eyes "if only you'd shut up and come to bed so I can hold you too."

Of course I did, and Green and Bracken held me tight until I slept soundly through the rising of the sun and beyond.

GREEN

Alien forms of worship

No one saw them enter the church. According to the press, Davis Stacia Kelly, daughter of a prominent businessman, had been murdered after leaving dinner with her family in Stanford Ranch, when she'd told them she was moving in with her boyfriend, whom they had never met. (Oh yes, Kyle was high on the suspect list—or would have been if anyone could remember what he looked like or where he lived.) Her father was well known, her mother was on a lot of community boards, and the evening attendance at the Episcopalian service on K Street was both healthy and well publicized.

For the three vampires, two were-creatures, two sidhe and little sorceress, it was like being top ten on America's most wanted and strolling into a police station for a drink of water. It was possible they might escape unnoticed, but only because a church with a thousand cameras was the last place anyone would expect the supernatural.

Cory held no idea of how risky it would be.

"Are you going to tell her?" Bracken asked Green nervously as they

watched everybody else load into the Suburban.

"Nope," he replied, smiling at Cory as she scowled at the folds of her black dress and hauled them in after her, trying to keep them out from under Renny's cat feet and Nicky's dress shoes.

"There's going to be cameras everywhere, Green..." And Green turned the full force of his gaze on Cory's *due'alle*.

"You promised," he said, and his voice didn't rise, but his position was unspeakably clear. "So did I. 'Neither time nor place did then adhere, yet you would make both?'"

"They make themselves." Bracken sighed. "Do you ever quote *Hamlet? Twelfth Night? Romeo and Juliet?*"

"Frequently." Green gathered his camel dress coat around his crème colored suit and straightened Cory's scarf around his neck as he moved around the front of the vehicle. "If it be not now, it will be to come, and if it be not to come, it will be now."

"We're going to get cau-aught," Bracken murmured to himself as they got into the Suburban, but Green could tell that it was just because it made him feel better to worry.

Everyone was dressed for the funeral except Renny, who had insisted on coming in cat form. Given who would be waiting in the back of the church, Green thought that bringing a were-creature might be the prudent thing to do.

The trip down to Sacramento was actually a pretty lively affair—as though the vampires who hadn't known Davy were making things easier on Cory, Renny, Bracken and Nicky who had, and it was hard to be depressed as they cleared Foresthill and took the freeway entrance West. The foothills had blossomed green under the rain, and the wildflowers had finally emerged. Since the fate of their child was the reason for the split between the Goddess and her mate, Easter wasn't really celebrated among the Goddess' get, but its counterpart, Oestre, the spring equinox, was in less than a week and Northern California's traditional two weeks of spring were here. The air coming in through the side windows was a complicated braid of cool and warm, flowers and damp concrete.

Green watched intermittently in the rearview mirror as Cory smiled and bantered with the vampires and tested the air coming in through the vented

window, her expression both dreamy and sad. She caught Green's eyes in the rearview mirror, and answered his questioning brow with, "I didn't give up anything for Lent."

"Sure you did," he said in an undertone for her only, "You gave up me—I came home early, that's all."

"Do you think anybody will notice us?" she asked seriously, the first time she acknowledged the risk they were running.

"We're getting there late—I hope not." He waited to see if she would catch the evasion but she was looking out the window again.

"Do you think we practiced enough?"

"Yes," he answered unequivocally. "You'll make the angels weep, dearest."

"I didn't know the angels listened in on us," she bantered back.

"For you, I'm sure they'll eavesdrop."

She grinned at him, and he felt better and better about this mad exposure to the media. Anything to help her heal.

Contrary to myth, vampires don't actually spontaneously combust upon entering a church or touching holy water. Given the nature of their recovery from death, they had no choice but to believe in the Goddess and believing in her counterpart was not a hardship—most vampires simply chose to worship at the feet of the Goddess instead. It seemed only fair since God had been the one to deny them sunlight.

So there was no spectacular conflagration when the six of them entered the back of the church. It was a classically imposing structure squarely built in tan stucco with plain arches at the sides and an exquisite spire and delicate bell at its front. It was placed in a neighborhood of tastefully expensive homes with manicured flowerbeds and neat sidewalks, just before K street did something really flaky and turned into a street with another name near a couple of roundabouts that would have had Bracken inventing new swear words in Elvish if he'd been driving. Parking was hellific, but the press had already done most of its opening shots, so few cameras were whirring as they parked the car in front of one of the houses nearly two blocks from the church, and then hiked to the entrance in the March drizzle.

They left Renny curled up in a shadow on the side of the building, then walked through the stone-tiled foyer to the inside, using their preternatural quiet so as not to disturb the ritual of mourning inside.

The interior had an almost Spartan grandeur—white-washed stucco walls, small set in stained glass arches high up upon them, burgundy carpet and dark-wood pews. It's simplicity spoke of an earnest faith that Green admired, but he was reasonably sure the admiration would be one way, should those attending the funeral got a really good look at him—or at Bracken. But the front of the church was crowded and the back empty, and he thought that maybe, if they parked themselves in the back and left the moment they were done, no one would remember anything but Cory's heartbreaking voice.

The pastor walked up to greet them, an imposing man in his fifties, with dignified looking gray hair, pale gray eyes and a definite sense of his own importance.

"All friends of the deceased are welcome..." he began, then he took a second look at Green and Bracken. Then a third, and his face narrowed and hardened. "But friends of Satan are friends of nobody."

Cory looked at him in shock, and then looked Green in the eyes with surprise and sadness. Green hadn't told her that he and Bracken wouldn't be able to wear their glamour—an ancient treaty between the God's people and the Goddess' forbade any sort of disguise in a place of worship. Her lips parted, and Green worked hard at a shrug and a smile. She took his hand in hers, and he felt her lips whisper across the pale skin of his knuckles, then she turned towards the minister like a warrior doing battle. She tightened her expression, her freckles scrunching up around her nose. "A minister of all people should know that dichotomies don't exist," she said mutinously. "Just because we're not God's creatures doesn't mean we're the others' either."

They had stopped three pews before the crowd began, and she kept her voice controlled enough that no one looked back, but her words brought arching of grayed eyebrows and a tilting of a heavy, long-boned head. "Who are you?" he asked, keeping his voice civilized.

"We're friends of the deceased," Cory replied with dignity. "And we'd like to honor her in song."

"You—all of you—knew Miss Kelly?" he asked, and Green was

wondering if the man heard thunder as he realigned his world with their presence.

"My beloved knew her," Green answered, before Cory could do battle again. "Some of us are here for her, but most of us are here for Davy. If you please—all we ask is a song." He nodded towards the front of the church, where a group of girls who looked like high school friends were engaged in a weepy version of *Blessed Be the Tie That Binds*. "We can sing just as well from the back of the church as from the altar—nothing will be defiled, and an innocent child will be honored. Don't tell me that God is forbidding things like that now as well."

The pastor flushed, and nodded towards the pew against the back wall with a sole, familiar looking occupant. "Something tells me you'll be quite comfortable there," he said stiffly, and Cory sighed.

"Try not to think you're better than God," she snapped. "Not even He hates us, you know." And the man tossed her a startled look before regaining his measured dignification down the aisle of the church.

Kyle didn't glance at them as they sat down, but Cory looked at him with narrowed eyes and a firm purpose during the rest of the service, and Green knew she was either mentally rehearsing the song, or mentally rehearsing what she was going to do to Kyle to make him want to live. She was most definitely not paying attention to the rest of the service, and for that Green was only grateful—he could hardly bear to watch her compare herself to other humans and wonder if she was better or worse as it was, and watching human reaction to grief would only confuse her. Most humans were not honest when they grieved.

Several people got up and spoke, telling anecdotes of Davy's childhood, of her days in school, the words 'good' and 'sweet' and 'will be really missed' coming up so often that Green had a brief, extremely irreverent and nearly unkind thought that creative writing should be mandatory in American human education, before the minister nodded grudgingly to the back of the church.

The three of them stood, Cory in the center of Green and Bracken, and paused, taking their time from Green. Then, with his nod, they launched into a song that quite frankly reminded Green of Adrian. When Cory suggested it, she'd said that it was the song she'd never been able to sing for him. "I didn't know Davy well enough to have a song for her," she'd added with an embarrassed shrug.

"What song would you sing for me?" Bracken asked curiously.

"*Lifetimes* by Sheryl Crow," she'd replied promptly, then looked at Green sideways. "You're not going to ask?"

"Do you want to tell me?"

"You have too many songs to name one," she replied with soft eyes, and he'd smiled gently, he thought. Something in his eyes must have troubled her though, because she'd frowned a little. "A lot of living gets you a lot of songs!" She'd defended, and then turned away before they could continue.

Now, she had a little line drawn between her eyebrows as she concentrated, and stood, shoulders back, carrying the lyrics with a subtle melody that was meant to depend on dreamy instrumental. He and Bracken sang the instrumentals for her, un-selfconsciously and clearly, so subtle as to blend behind her, their voices only emerging when the song called for back-up vocals.

The walls of my memory divide the thorns from the roses...

And suddenly, although his voice never faltered, he was seeing Adrian behind his shuttered gaze, as he'd first seen him, filthy matted hair, the fury of ten years of hell burning in his spangled eyes.

My mind drifts away...we have only today...

And now he was seeing Cory on that first night, plump, barely aware of herself as a power, or even as a woman, stoically cleansing the scene of a tragedy. She'd had no idea, none at all, of the joy and the pain that would follow, and her bravery had impressed the hell of him, just as it impressed him now.

Heal me from all this sorrow

As I let you go...

And abruptly he was there again, in the church, singing softly without even a flicker in his voice, and wondering if there had ever been any way to save Cory from the gradual alienation of her own species. And if there had been, would he have risked it? He listened to her now, as they sang together, her throaty alto stretching surprisingly as the song climaxed, risking a look at the startled, moved group of mourners that had caught their breath to hear beauty as it spelled their hearts in plain notes. He remembered the feel of her power, pulsing through the

resisting bodies of nearly sixty vampires as they fought to save Bracken and Nicky, and he could feel still beneath his fingers the satin of her flesh as they moved in the night.

Now I'm living, in your afterglow...

And suddenly a wave of sadness crashed over him, foaming about his mouth and nose until he could hardly breathe, and when he had fought his way clear, it receded, leaving in its wake a feeling of...transparency, of insubstantiality that was so comforting that Green almost stopped singing with fear. No. His body was offering to fade, to become transparent, to drift into nothingness until the hot breeze of a foothill summer blew through his precious temperate garden and carried even his memory away. It happened to the fey, even to the sidhe, when the weight of living became more than they could bear, but it couldn't happen to him. *She needs me*. He thought in panic, and the feeling passed, leaving his singing uninterrupted, the moment as though it had never been. But he would remember it, use it as goad—melancholy must never be allowed to take over, because once he had faded, he could never return. And his people needed him. *Cory* needed him—hadn't the last few days proved that? Being needed was all he'd ever lived for.

The song wound down, their voices twining, releasing, until only Bracken's voice remained, trailing off in the final haunting vocal, and they were left in the stunned silence of the grieving assembly. There was no protocol for responding to song in church, Green knew, no relieving applause, no way of acknowledging that people had moved you, struck a chord in your emotions that still vibrated in your throat, and had done you good. So it was that in that awed quiet that they bowed slightly, and at Green's signal, moved out of the pew followed by their people, and, as they all hesitated and looked at him expectantly, followed by Davy's beloved as well.

Green's people kept stoic faces as they caught sight of Kyle's mask of bloody tears, and hoped that the assembly would be still too caught up in the web of song and sadness to react. How could he show up here, among humans, and let them see that tell? It was more madness than Green and Bracken and their tell-tale ears and facial features—these could be explained away as deformity, or foreign visitors, but blood is blood, and every human who actually looked would recognize that the scarlet streaks down Kyle's face were the same vital element that his lover had lost all over the concrete outside her father's house in Stanford Ranch.

Phillip and Marcus flanked him immediately, and Grace took position at his front, and together, the lot of them made a somewhat dignified (albeit mysterious) exit from the church. Cory glanced behind them once as they left, her gaze weaving in and out of her people behind her, and Green heard a barely suppressed snicker.

"What?" Bracken whispered as they cleared the great wooden doors.

"The minister," she murmured, "It looks like he swallowed his pet poisoned toad!"

"Good," Bracken said darkly. "Pompous prick..."

"Let me go," Kyle said distinctly as they walked down the concrete steps to the sidewalk below and Cory replied, lowly and clearly, "We have business, Kyle. Wait until we find some shadows..."

"We passed an alley about a block from the car," Nicky supplied, looking around nervously—the moon was just coming off of full, so it was brighter than the pinkish lights that lined the street and shadows were harder than usual to find.

Cory nodded. "You hear that? Just wait."

They walked quietly, past the two remaining news vans waiting for shots of the emerging crowd, past the white stucco houses, almost ridiculously tiny after the vastness of Green's home, many of them one or two bedroom, but with sweet, manicured flower gardens—monetary wealth with scant family size was Green's estimation.

The promised alley was the sunken driveway to a detached garage on one of the larger properties, but there were thick seedless mulberry trees in both the lower yard and the upper yard, and the closest street light was four houses away—the darkness was both complete and eerie. The vampires looked more at ease than since the moment they walked into the church.

Cory had turned to face the bereaved vampire when Kyle apparently lost all sanity and blurred past his escort to seize her arm, snarling, "I said le..." It was as far as he got before Bracken and Green grabbed an arm a piece and shoved him against the concrete wall of the sunken driveway. Bracken was growling, his eyes throwing off amber sparks, and Green felt the unmistakable surge of the red-cap's power before Cory touched his shoulder and murmured—

not in his ear, but loud enough for him to hear, and he charged down, breathing in deep, shuddering gasps.

"No," Cory said evenly, sparing a glance for Bracken before turning her attention back to their objective.

"No what?" Kyle spat. His eyes were spitting red sparks in the spring darkness, whirling with the vampire's change. He was struggling silently with Green and Bracken and between the tendons popping out at his neck and temples, his emerging hunting face and the blood of his tears crawling across his cheeks and chin like demented spiders, his face was a truly terrifying mask in the dark. Cory was unafraid.

"No, we won't let you go." She swallowed, and Green saw her spine stiffen and her 'leader face' fall firmly where it belonged. "And no, we won't let you stand in the middle of the street and fry like an ant when the sun comes out. No. You no longer have a choice in the matter." She walked towards him as she said this, and now she was face to face with an angry vampire, her complete faith that Bracken and Green wouldn't let him hurt her evident in her posture, her voice, the way she didn't even have to look at them, and the way she stood toe to toe, looking up into the face of an enraged killer, and told him that she hadn't given up.

"Who's going to stop me?" Kyle growled, his throat thickened with the change, his words fouled by the lips that wouldn't fit over his many and pointed teeth.

"I won't have to stop you," she said softly, reaching her hands up to his crimson cheek. She stroked her thumb over the bloody tears tracking down his face while he strained away from her touch, then she cocked an eye at Green, who nodded. "I just have to make you want to live." She popped the thumb in her mouth, closed her eyes and sucked in her breath, her face had she known it, transfiguring, glowing with Adrian's violet light, her features shown for the loveliness they truly were. "Coffee...damp earth...dew...the smell of fish and . Her nose wrinkled, a very young, human expression that contrasted with the mystery of what she did with her vampires. "Fish and worms...and a voice...older...loved..."

She opened her eyes and looked into his softening face, waiting until his eyes stopped whirling red with anger and for his teeth to start diminishing. "Fishing with your grandfather when you were young," she murmured. "That's

what you miss most about your human life. That's why you loved Davy—she made you feel like the world was hopeful again, like each rising held something to look forward to.”

"How did you..." But before he could finish the question, she popped that same thumb into his mouth and nicked it on a not-quite-receded fang, waiting breathlessly until Kyle swallowed in surprise before moving her hand down to his shoulder. Now it was Kyle's turn to close his eyes and suck in his breath, and then his body sagged, so abruptly that Green and Bracken let him go, lowering him gently to his knees.

"Oh God..." Kyle's voice thrummed with agony, and then it rose, the pain so exquisite not one of them watching could hear him without tears. "Oh God...sunshine...sunshine...you bitch...it's a lie...there will never be sunshine for me again...Oh Davy..." And now he sobbed, wept, cleansed himself the way he had needed to but hadn't, because he hadn't had a Green, or a Bracken, or a Nicky to hold him.

Cory held him. Cory lowered herself to her knees and wrapped her arms around him until his sobbing subsided, whispering soft things against his ear, and when he was down to gentle hiccups—a human gift from the Goddess, those — she leaned her forehead against his, and now Green and Bracken could hear her, because her words held purpose and control.

"Okay..." she murmured. "And now, you're going to feed, because you haven't and you're almost crazy with it...and then...hear me out..." Because Renny had stepped forward and he made an animal whimper of hunger in his throat, but Cory wouldn't turn him loose on her friend unless she knew she had command. "Now listen..." And he turned his bloody, grief-wrought face towards her and she ran a hand over his cheek and leaned into him, so close that, looking down at them, Green could only see the tiniest sliver of air to define the two of them. "You're going to feed, and then you're going to fly with your kiss-mates." She closed her eyes and Grace and Phillip and Marcus opened their eyes wider, looking at Kyle with whirling crimson anticipation. "You're going to fly with them, and share flesh and blood and by the end of the night, you won't think of hurting yourself, because it would hurt them, and you will love them as much as I do, right?" She nodded her head slowly, and waited until Kyle's head nodded with her, their communication so intimate that Kyle lowered his head, barely brushing her lips with his, and Cory let him, for just a moment, before she slipped gracefully back and called for Renny. There was sadness then, and Kyle

reached out to caress Cory's cheek, but Cory caught his hand in hers and moved back so that Renny could plant her paws on Kyle's shoulder, and he lowered his head and carefully extended his fangs only. They punctured a fur-covered carotid, and Renny began to purr, writhing her body sinuously, rubbing against Kyle's chest until he groaned and released her, leaving her so clenched for fulfillment that she mewed pitifully and wound herself around Green's legs. Green dropped a hand to her ruff and sent a little bit of will into her, watching bemusedly as she shuddered and growled, and then plopped, dazedly at his feet. Kyle stroked her head absently and then wiped his mouth with the back of the sleeve of his black leather jacket.

He looked immediately to Cory for guidance, and she gestured to Marcus and Phillip who nudged Green and Bracken out of the way to take their new brother by the arms and heave him to his feet. Grace stepped forward then and extended her fangs. They were of a height, so she didn't need to bend—she simply leaned forward and sniffed at his neck, her eyes dilating slightly, her unnecessary breath coming in pants. She traced a delicate line down his throat with her tongue, and he groaned and shuddered, then she traced the same line with her fang and he moaned with such wanting, such terrible skin hunger that Green's heart went out to him—he'd been without his kiss for far, far too long, and as the crimson welled up along his neck and Grace lapped at it, then Marcus, then Phillip, their tongues doing gentle things along his skin. Kyle's moan became more demanding, more pleading, until the three of them wrapped their arms around him, and around each other, and Grace emitted a hiss of satisfaction, clamping her fully extended feeding fangs into his throat with full and eager lips. All of them shuddered, groaned, came in time with him, and the only thing keeping them on their feet was each other. A raw, completed, hungering sound burst from Kyle's throat, and the huddle of vampires burst open just enough for them to bend at the knees and as a whole launch into the air, Kyle's animal cries of grief, of relief, of release wailing through the night, and his brethren's answering calls were never far behind.

Cory sat abruptly down in the middle of the driveway, her full black skirt pooling around her. Green squatted down beside her, taking inventory. Her gold button-up sweater was dark in places, from Kyle's wept blood, and she herself had tear tracks, glistening in the faint glow from the street light.

"Well that sucked," she muttered, her voice choked.

"You were magnificent," he said truly, and she shrugged and wiped her

cheek with the sleeve of her black pea coat.

"Nicky?" she asked, looking away from Green's admiration in embarrassment, "Nicky, honey, could you keep an eye out for them for a bit? You've got your cell phone in your pocket, right?"

"Yeah..."

"Good." She looked in the sky, where a human might be confused by the perspective of the tall old trees into thinking fluttering shapes were simply large bats flickering in the distance. "Make sure they come home—if they haven't started by, say, three a.m., give us a call—I think he'll be all right, but I don't want the others in danger because he still has a death wish, okay?"

"No problem, Lady Cory," he said, without any irony and she made a face. Nicky stepped forward and went to kiss her cheek, but she turned and took his lips, seeking the intimacy she'd missed purposefully when Kyle had tried. Their lips tangled for a moment, and she leaned in, making the kiss real, and passionate, and true, before pulling back.

"Be safe, right Nick?"

"Absolutely," he said, giving her a parting kiss on the brow, and then he had changed, in that quick, graceful way that the Avians did better than any other were, and was gone.

Cory sighed and held her hand to Green so he could pull her up, but he bent to one knee and scooped her into his arms.

"Green...I'm fine—it's all good—I can walk..."

He kissed her hair. "I know—but, for a minute, could you pretend that you need me?"

She whimpered a little in her throat and leaned against his chest, her hand spreading beneath her cheek and flexing a little, like she was making sure he was real. "No pretending necessary."

And they gathered together and went to find the car.

They arrived at the hill at around nine, changed, and mooched about the front room until Bracken put in *Rent* and they watched it. Cory brought her knitting, but she was working on something smaller and brightly colored and she

made it a point to glance up at the movie and make comments while she paused her work, so Green met Bracken's eyes and agreed to let it be.

"For you?" Green asked.

"Mm-nn." She shook her head no. "Matching hats, for Gavin and Graeme." She smiled slightly. "Since I'm a superhero and all."

Oh damn—another harsh subject. He sighed. "Beloved...about Chloe..."

Cory's hands stilled, and she looked up at Green from her spot in the middle of the couch. "Yeah—I know—she's not fitting in. We're going to have to...I don't know...banish her? Shun her? Brain-wipe her? Something."

Green nodded, glad she understood. "I was hoping to bring it up to Grace in a few days—after Kyle is comfortable. Chloe—every time she's here, she's destructive. She's angry. She says and does things that hurt Grace—that hurt you. I just can't allow her to stay."

"But the boys..." Cory said anxiously. "We can let them remember, right?" She bit her lip and looked at him pleadingly. "I would...Grace would really miss those kids, if she wasn't allowed to keep in touch."

Meaning that Cory had fallen hopelessly in love with the two children and she wanted to know they were safe, and that she could make them hers as she hadn't been able to with Davy. Green smiled and took the hand that was lying quiet in the wool, bringing it to his lips and grazing it in a very tender, private way. "I am helpless to deny you anything, beloved."

She rolled her eyes and said "Bullshit!" But he could tell she was pleased. Then her smile faded and she grimaced. "I'll tell her," she said softly, tugging at her hand.

"We'll tell her," he corrected, raising an eyebrow and keeping her hand where it belonged for just a moment longer. "It's a decision that's best for the hill, not just that affects the vampires."

Cory nodded. "Deal." Then a sudden thought. "Hey—you guys never told me what happened to Max's obnoxious sister."

Bracken looked up from her other side—he had been playing chess with Twilight, who was sitting in the stuffed chair to his diagonal. The chess board

was a special edition *Simpson's* board—Bracken had gotten it from Adrian's room. Different chess boards had been Bracken's running Christmas gift to Adrian from the time he was a child, Green remembered, and he was happy to see this one out. Tonight, to his immense irritation, Bracken was losing.

Bracken was unaware of Green's scrutiny, and replied to Cory. "We had Marcus mind-wipe her." He shook his head in disgust. "It was pretty sad—Marc rolled her mind and suddenly she went from the poster-child of judgmental harpies to a giggling ho-bag. Max was so embarrassed he almost told Marc to do her and let her remember it, but Grace made him take her home."

Cory laughed a little, then she laughed a lot. "Poor Max," she giggled. "He's such a good guy—no wonder he had such a hard time with us."

Green released her hand and said thoughtfully, "The thing is, Corinne Carol-Anne, that Max is just the better side of human. I know you worry about getting along with your own people, but it's not that you don't—it's that you're very careful about who you do like. You pick people who are accepting, who are honorable. Chloe and Michelle aren't. Max is, and Davy was. It's that simple."

Cory's silence was ominous, then she squinted up at Green impishly. "I'm going to show you how well adjusted I'm feeling today by not answering that," she said after a moment.

"You're going to school tomorrow?" he returned playfully. It was Monday, and they hadn't gone that morning.

"Uh-huh," she answered affirmatively, looking slyly from her knitting.

"You're going to see Hallow?" he asked, keeping his voice playful.

"Uh-huh," she answered back, her eyes dancing gently, although she kept her head tilted down.

"Then I'll let you slide," he responded grandly.

She reached behind Bracken and yanked an unused but squashed throw pillow that she chucked at Green. He fielded the pillow and stuck out his tongue, she returned the gesture, and they let the matter lie. But when he had gone back to his laptop, he caught her gazing at him thoughtfully, traces of her playful smile still on her face. She winked at him when he caught her, and finally, he thought, she was starting to understand herself and her place in the many worlds

she inhabited. And she felt good about it.

At ten o'clock, just before they were about to retire (all in Cory's bedroom — Green had put off his all other 'appointments' until after Davy's funeral, and Cory had been too grateful to protest or even to mention it, in fear that he'd have to see someone else after all) the vampires returned. Cory caught their brain-chatter mid-yawn, almost choking on her own tongue she was so caught up in what they were doing when they returned.

When her focus returned to the room she was in, she started talking, stopped, flushed, and tried again. "Uhm...they're...they're...Marcus and Phillip are taking him to that room with the gi-normous bed," she said after a moment, then looked up and caught Arturo's eye, who was reading a book of Walt Whitman's poetry in a corner of the room. "Uhm...Arturo—I think Grace wants you." She swallowed and blushed again. "Now," she added, nodding her head. Arturo got up with some alacrity and practically blurred to the back bedroom, and only a few minutes later Nicky walked through the front door, shaking moisture from his hair as he did so.

"It started raining again," he complained by way of greeting.

"I'm glad you're back, Nicky," Cory replied mildly.

She pushed herself up off the couch using Bracken's shoulder, and he sighed and conceded his queen, shaking his head at Twilight saying, "I used to think I was good at this."

"You play like someone has been letting you win," Twilight said guilelessly, and Green hid a smile at Bracken's startled look as he too moved off the couch.

Cory greeted Nicky with a hug and he moved towards the kitchen with its big raw-wood table and started hunting for something to eat. He was still bitching about the weather. "You people keep telling me that summers here are hot, but I swear it's never going to stop pissing down water, frozen or no."

Cory laughed and then moved him out of the way to reach into the refrigerator and pull out a chocolate cream and a banana cream pie. "You'll think that, and then one week it will go from sixty-five to ninety-five in three days time and you won't know what to do with yourself." She put the pies on the table and then set down silverware, and was turning to get plates when Nicky just

dove into the middle of the banana cream pie with a fork.

"Ge' i' qui'," he garbled with his mouth full. He swallowed. "Don't mess with plates, I'm taking no prisoners."

Green and Bracken had already grabbed forks and were diving in, so Cory sat on her knees on the chair by Nicky and joined them. They wolfed pie in companionable silence, and when they had slowed down a little, (both pies almost completely demolished) Green licked the whipped cream off the corner of his mouth and said "So, does anyone want to hear about my plan to protect us?"

"I do," Bracken said smugly, and Cory looked at him from narrowed eyes, and then Green started talking and her eyes got very, very wide indeed.

Somewhere in the middle of his description of how Green and the sylphan leaders had healed their entire enclave of sylphs of everything from scrapes to bad haircuts the night Bracken and Nicky had been attacked, her jaw dropped open. When he suggested using the same means to *protect* everybody in the hill, her eyes glazed over a little.

"I'm not a porn star," she said stiffly, and Bracken almost spit pie crumbs.

"Of course not," he said, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "They usually have bigger boobs."

"Ass. Hole," she replied succinctly, socking him in the arm, and Bracken grinned back without shame.

"That will probably be Green's pleasure," he said back, enjoying the way her mouth opened and closed before she could come up with a retort.

"Oh fu..." she trailed off on the insult and/or instruction, because they could all see her realize, that was the idea. She wrinkled her nose and shook her head. "How do you know I can even control it?" she asked accusingly. "We've never tried to...harness it like this."

Green grinned, a blinding expression that had worked on all genders since he'd been of Goddess' age. "Two words," he said. "Seat. Cushions."

She flushed, so thoroughly, with so much arousal, that suddenly the great, shiny, blue tiled kitchen which had been companionable and pleasant before was

charged powerfully with want. Everybody was abruptly made aware of the fact that Cory shared a bed with all three men, and that the possibility of them all being in that bed together and naked made their breath catch.

"That was a fluke," she mumbled, not meeting any eyes at all.

"That was control," he corrected throatily. She stood up, and so did he, like a mountain lion following the motions of a jackrabbit. He pinned her with his gaze, and she looked up at him, flushed, warm, panting slightly, the tip of her tongue coming out to lick her lips before she gnawed on her lower lip in an attempt to keep the many, fertile imaginings in her mind from running all over her face. "And you have control now, don't you?" He nodded, waiting for her to catch the motion herself. She did, mesmerized by his eyes, lost like a light-struck deer. "You control the sex, and you control the magic, and you control us, and we can use that control but only if you're game."

She swallowed, hard, still nodding. Her mouth moved, her wide, full mouth, and she licked her lips again, and nodded once or twice, and the whole room was still caught in her panting breaths and in the heartbeats that all three of the preternatural males could hear, feel, smell, throbbing beneath her skin.

"But what about her?" Nicky asked after a moment, swallowing a couple of times before he got it out. His eyes were locked on the two of them. "I mean..." He laughed a little, and took a swig of milk from the glass next to him, rubbing his lips together. "Everything she's ever done has affected things...not her. Will she be able to protect herself?"

Green smiled, because he'd thought of this. "Cory, come here for a moment, will you?" Her breath caught, but she did, her body coming just a heartbeat from touching his all along the front, and he lowered his lips to her ear, his hair falling between her and her other lovers as he whispered against the whorls of her skin. "Turn around and face them, beloved."

She did, breaking off eye-contact at the last possible moment, and looking shyly out at Bracken and Nicky from under the curly fall of her rust-colored hair. Green's pale hand moved hotly across her hip, pulling down the waistband of her jeans and pushing up the hem of her oversized man's T-shirt until a patch of skin tantalizingly close to her bikini line was showing, drawing Bracken's and Nicky's gaze like a bright toy. He bent and whispered in her ear again, asking her for the words she'd written in that fit of whimsy the night he'd come home from his longest trip. Her flush intensified, and she whispered—even though she knew

Nicky and Bracken could hear, she whispered—and the throaty sound of "Cory loves Green" made the temperature in the kitchen kick up another few notches. There were spots of high color in Bracken's bright-pale face, and Nicky was blotchy scarlet with the blood flooding under his skin.

Bracken sucked in a breath so tightly past his lips and teeth that the whooshing sound seemed to vibrate, and Nicky made a strangled 'ungh' sound near his throat and tongue. "That's amazing," Bracken said on his exhaled breath, at about the time Nicky said "God that's hot."

She looked down, surprised, and the little moue of embarrassment was accompanied by a feeble struggle to cover her skin with her hands, when Green's hands were there to expose it. There, upside-down and written across her hip beneath the gently rounded bone, was her name, a crooked little heart, and Green's name, shimmering in dazzling gold.

"But how..." she asked, when her struggling stopped and she became content to let them look at her with hot, dilated eyes and desire.

"You know how it happened," he murmured. "Touch, blood, and song—its how all strong magic happens." She groaned a little and he moved his lips against her neck, enjoying this moment, this locked moment of wanting between the four of them very, very much.

"Green," she said with as much dryness as she could muster, "that wasn't blood."

Bracken whispered "Cory you're killing me," and Nicky said "ungh" again.

"Even better," Green said smugly, knowing that if he didn't have her around the waist, her knees would buckle because she was melting against him, against his thighs, against his erection, a puddle of want, coating his skin. "It's made of the same animal essence, but it's given freely, given in pleasure, and the song written in touch with it will bind the wearer so tightly to her lovers that she'll be safe from..."

"From unbeing?" She came out of the spell of desire just enough to sound curious and sharp about this, and then he kissed her neck again and she whimpered.

"From about anything," he said, and then looked up with smoldering eyes at Bracken and Nicky. "You need to think of her names," he told them. "All of

them, good, bad, silly...if he tries to get her with blood, she needs to be so tightly bound with all the ways we know her that her body wouldn't even think of unmaking itself, right?"

They nodded, eyes still locked on that glowing strip of bare skin. The two of them, so different, so alienated in January, actually swallowed in tandem.

"When?" Bracken asked coherently.

"Five days," Green said. "The equinox is in five days—oestre. It's a powerful day for us on its own—life, rebirth, redemption, resurrection. It will give us a boost." For fun, he ran his hands down to her hips, letting her shirt fall, then continuing down the front of her thighs before wrapping his fingers around the inside of her legs, palms against her skin.

The two other men shuddered.

"What do we do now?" Nicky asked pitifully, but Green wasn't feeling particularly merciful tonight.

"Tonight we go to bed alone and beat off," Bracken said harshly, but then he stood up and moved to where his beloved was practically lying vertically against Green, and bent to kiss her so hard and so passionately that she actually moaned and shuddered, almost brought to climax by the taste of his tongue in her mouth. Then he was gone, quickly enough that Green's hair fluttered with his passing. Nicky came to her too, touching lips gently, rubbing the side of his nose against her cheek, teasing her until Green couldn't stand it anymore and brought his hand to cup their lover's head and pull him in for a kiss that would arouse as much as it teased. When she whimpered again, pleading, Nicky pulled away and Green swung her up into his arms and blurred to his bedroom. Five days from now, they would be together, skin to skin, and it would be mind-blowing, amazing, and shattering. Tonight she was writhing with passion, with feeling, with life, with want for all three of them. Tonight she was his.

CORY

The Winder and the Swift

I sat in Hallow's office, looking at that generic brown-framed government clock accusing me of wasting its little clicks, and sighed. Two minutes down, twenty-eight to go. I adjusted my knitting, wiggled into the horrible orange naugahyde chair that I was sitting in sideways, and resolved to beg for mercy.

"Hey," I said on a deep breath, making him jump. He was just settling down to lunch and grading a stack of essays on the difference between male and female neuron responses and how they affected sexuality, and for a moment I felt the weight of being such a shitty and reluctant client descend on me full force. He actually had a *job* to do on this campus, and then he had me to look forward to. On that note, I tried again.

"I'm sorry." I looked at him and shook my head. "Look—can we do this next week? Today I'll just sit here and let you enjoy your lunch, okay? I mean...I know why everybody is worried about me, right? I am young. For the things..." A vision of Bracken, lying on that power bubble and the knowledge that only Green and I could save him slid in front of my eyes. I blocked it out. "For the things I've had to do, the responsibilities I've taken on, I'm young, and inexperienced, and I wasn't exactly...brimming with self-confidence when I became a part of this in the first place. I acknowledge that. I realize that I've been trying to be all 'human on campus' and 'supernatural woman' off-campus and that's dumb. You can't put yourself in boxes any more than you can put other people in boxes. I tried to put Green and Bracken and Nicky in boxes, and that was dumb too. Green was my 'gentle lover' and Bracken was 'the guy I fought with' and Nicky was 'the friend' and we'd just ignore the once-a-month sex, but Bracken is gentle and I fight with Green and I want Nicky to be a bigger part of my life and you just can't define things like that. Friends are friends whether they're human or were-cat or Martian and lovers are lovers, and you can't minimize them or write them off of a whole emotional range just because it makes it easier for your poor simple overloaded human brain to deal with. You can't wrap up your friends and emotions in cubbyholes because there aren't enough cubbyholes and you want more and more and more and more and soon you're just like the Hollow Man, coming apart at the seams, unmaking everything you touch just because you want everything whole and perfect and to

be a part of it in the worst way. So I understand all that. I understand that I'm going to need to talk to you and you'll help me feel better about my screw-ups and that I can't talk about my screw-ups to Green and Bracken because they are, bless them both, stupid in love with me and they don't see my flaws until I'm catatonic and then it hurts them so much to help me that I feel bad all over again, so you're going to be very necessary in the future and I thank you for it. But not today. Today I'm tired, and I'm sad, and I'm scared and terrified and excited all at once and I just want to sit and let it wash all over me until I'm clean and ready for what I need to do next, okay? So can we not play the whole "emotional dentist" thing? Today I'll just be a kid knitting in your office and you'll get to eat your lunch in peace."

Hallow sat quietly through my request, and now, I could swear he was trying not to laugh. Finally, after a few attempts to speak he just shook his head, breathed out through his nose and said "Absolutely, Lady Cory. You're under no obligation to work anything out with me today."

I nodded happily and gave him a pleased smile, then turned back to Green's sweater. We did our things for a few blissful moments of silence when Hallow spoke, and I was the one who jumped this time.

"Is that it? Is that 'the Sweater'?"

Of course Bracken had told him about it. He'd gone first today and was waiting outside with our honor guard. "Yeah," I sighed. "I hope he likes it...I mean..." This was embarrassing to voice. "I hope all the weirdness" pain "that I was going through doesn't make it...hurt or anything when he wears it."

"Here." Hallow stood up and moved over to run his hands over the fabric I'd worked on during that awful day. Eventually he shook his head and gave the fabric one last stroke. "Mmm...no," he said, "love, sadness, melancholy, confusion...a desire to keep him safe...but nothing he wouldn't want to touch from you." He returned to his desk, while I shook my head and went to go with my first instinct and yank it out. "Stop!" He commanded, and I raised my eyebrows at him.

"Sadness, melancholy, confusion?" I asked. "Do you think that's not going to hurt him to touch?"

"How many times does he have to tell you he loves all of you before you believe it?" he asked bluntly, and I swore and sighed and put my needles back in

place and started knitting again.

"Fine," I muttered. "Like he hasn't had a sad enough time of it in two lousy millennia of living."

"We live with it or we die, Cory," Hallow said evenly. "Give him credit for knowing which side of the fence he wants to be on."

I swallowed and worked my cable needle. "It's awful," I said after a moment. "Knowing that I'm the one keeping him here. It's scary and awful. I'm so fragile, and he's so badly needed, and I can't hardly bear the idea that his existence is pinned on the hope that I will live."

Hallow sighed, and I looked at him in surprise. His sky blue eyes were glistening, and his beautiful, alien features were lined with pain. "You're very astute," he said after a moment. "And you were right to keep that particular observation to yourself. And now to me."

I nodded again and felt a few tears slip down my cheek before I dashed them away with the sleeve of my bright green Sac State sweatshirt. Silence descended again, but this time when Hallow broke it, I was glad of the interruption.

"So are you going to make a sweater for Nicky?" he asked, and I shrugged, because I'd been fretting over this triviality for a month.

"I would," I said hesitantly, "But the elves wear such classic stuff it's easy to spend a month or two on it. Nicky's so trendy, you know? I'd hate to work on something forever only to have Nicky look at it and think 'mmm...not really me, but I'll wear it to make her happy'. I think I'll make him a throw or something."

"That is a dilemma," Hallow said wisely. "But sweaters are so much more personal than blankets. He might be hurt if you go that way. How about a vest? Not quite so much work, and you can make something trendy before it goes out of style."

I brightened. "That is an excellent idea," I said happily, and now the quiet lasted for the next fifteen minutes while I knit and let my mind focus on a brightly colored wool vest with cables, a Vee-neck, and nifty sleeve finishing. He'd love it.

When our time was over, I stood up and stretched and Hallow walked me

to the door, opening it for me with a rather sly, "Thank you so much for your time today, my Lady—I think we really had a productive session."

Everybody in the hallway had heard him and I smiled gratefully. Only the two of us would ever have to know that I begged for mercy and weaseled out any therapy today.

As we trotted out of the C-shaped English building I went left towards physics and Bracken, Nicky and Renny went right, towards the gym.

I stopped in confusion. "Oh. I hadn't thought..."

"You met her because it was something you wanted to do for yourself, right?" Bracken said implacably.

"Well yeah...but I didn't even bring my clothes and my shoes..."

"I did," he said without blinking. "I brought Renny's too." Renny grimaced at him, and I could tell that she hadn't known this.

"Oh." I tried to think of a rational reason why I shouldn't run today, and nothing came to mind. "Okay." And off we went.

Later, as I was trotting around the track, my iPod playing *Green Day's* "Jesus of Suburbia" for this lap, it occurred to me (obvious I know) that Hallow was an elf and elves couldn't lie. This meant he'd been telling the truth about our 'really productive session' as he called it, and now, thinking back at what I said, I found myself flushing self-consciously and suppressing a giggle. Renny looked at me from her quiet padding at my side and I shrugged, not wanting to put it into words.

That evening Grace and I were working in the back of the store at the class table, winding untwisted hanks of yarn into balls so they weren't tangled when the customers bought them—or rather Grace was winding them because I often got impatient when setting the hanks up on the swift and the resulting tangle was a yarn-lover's nightmare. My job was looking through our stock to see what needed to be wound and re-labeling the wound yarn with all the pertinent info. Grace's job was to put the yarn on the umbrella-like swift that kept it taut for winding, and feed it to the ball winder, then wind the ball. It was sort of a fun thing to do, actually—an interim thing, a setting up of the working materials before they were actually used, and it was soothing to watch the swift whirl around and the ball of yarn spin and grow. We worked companionably for a little

while—both of us had plenty on our minds, I was sure, when we heard a customer ask Renny—who was at the register—where Chloe was this evening.

"I don't know," Renny said in her quiet, polite way.

"Well, I have to tell you that I'm sort of relieved," the woman said confidentially. "Sometimes she's just so angry...I love this place. It needs to be happy here."

Renny and I met guilty eyes across the store, and I carefully avoided looking at Grace as I dumped what looked to be the last load of mis-wound skeins on the table in front of her.

"She's right," Grace said quietly. "She's right. Chloe...I...when she was a little girl, she'd never let a grudge go. I thought...I thought it would be something that would mellow as she got older, but it hasn't..." She took a deep cleansing breath and tried again. Grace was often loud in her joy and self-contained in her grief—I had seen her be both. Tonight she was being self-contained, keeping her pain in her chest, and I knew from experience that you couldn't do that, it hurt more, but she needed to talk before she needed to cry, and maybe she didn't even need to cry with me.

"It's what brought her here, you know," Grace went on, setting this hank of truly amazing hand-dyed merino lace-weight on the wooden umbrella-swift, and threading it through the winder. Slowly she began winding, keeping her movements in careful check because the Goddess' speed didn't always work with plain God's physics. "Her damned bulldog tenaciousness just wouldn't let her let this go...but it's what's killing her here...she's too inflexible for us. She's not happy, I'm not happy..." Grace gave a controlled sniff. "She's going to have to go, isn't she?"

And for the first time I felt the true and personal weight of leadership descend on my chest. Green and I had made a decision, and now it was going to affect our friend, and she was going to abide by it because that was who we were. It wasn't life or death, it wasn't supernatural power, it was the life of a friend and I had to live with it and it really sucked.

"Yeah," I said after a laden moment, "Yeah. She's going to have to go." Grace nodded, keeping her back to me as she kept up that controlled movement with the winder and the swift.

"But Green and I were hoping we could let the boys keep their memory...maybe come visit once a year...if that's okay." Grace let a breath out with a big shudder, and I thought it would be safe to add the rest. "And...and if you can have them in the hill two nights from now..."

"For the protection spell?"

"Oh gees...does everybody know about that?"

And now a sound came out that sounded like a snork of laughter through painful tears. "Yes, Cory—we all know about that—I can't believe you're surprised."

"Only at how fast the news travels," I said dryly, "We just thought this up last night."

Grace turned towards me, her face conspicuously devoid of bloody tears. "Well I'm pleased that you thought of me and the boys," she said evenly, begging me not to make this a big deal. "And I'll do my best to get them there. And the night after that, Phillip and Marcus and I will take care of Chloe—wipe her memory, have the people up in Redding do the same with her husband—and we'll send them all on their way."

She sounded so matter-of-fact, but I knew this was hurting her. "We'll do it — Green will, I mean," I said, and she nodded. Tentatively I stepped forward and held out my arms, tilting my head to let her know that if she didn't feel like letting go on me, walking away was an option. She smiled, just a little, and caught me up in a ferocious hug and I hugged her back just as ferociously. "I'm so sorry," I whispered. "I'm sorry we couldn't be more for your family."

"Oh sweetie..." she sniffled against my shoulder, "Don't you know by now that this is my family?"

"Good," I murmured. "Good." And we hugged and hugged and held, until the service bell rang again and duty called and I didn't think she could do this anymore without crying and the copious clean-up that would require. We separated and she gave me a motherly peck on the cheek, and then she turned back to her work. I went to move some more inventory from the back of the store to the front to give her some space, and our night pattered on. As I wove my way between the shelves of yarn and the bolts of cloth and books I heard a familiar voice in my head.

Well done, beloved.

Thanks, Green. I thought back. You know I only learn from the best.

Right before closing time we sent Bracken out for food while Renny and I counted the drawers in the back, and Renny brought up my appalling lack of privacy again.

"So...what is it?" she asked, looking at me sideways from cat-curious eyes.

"What's what?" Even when I was working at the Chevron money counting had taken me a while, and some poor college student had cashed in her coin jar to buy a skein of Lorna's Laces to make her girlfriend a pair of socks. I'd contemplated learning how to make socks, but Bracken and Green were a size eighteen at least, and even that wouldn't have stopped me but unless it's deep snow, they abhor shoes. I'd make them for Nicky, but he tended to lose things in trans, and I didn't know how unglued I'd come if I spent two weeks on a pair of wool socks only to have them disappear into the ether.

Renny came to a pause in her counting and waited for me to do the same. "What's the big 'ritual' that you guys are doing Thursday night?" She spoke *sotto* voice, but everybody's hearing was so acute I was wondering why Bryn and the nymph whose name I could never remember didn't run into the back to hear the answer.

I shrugged, trying to be neutral. "You know...usual gang-bang...no big."

I expected Renny to snark or to make some bad, blunt pun, but she just looked at me, troubled, until I was forced to look back at her. Max had moved his stuff into her room, and Green had given him a special place to keep his guns and the other assorted cop paraphernalia since he was going to keep his job as long as possible and even I had to keep my gun as far from the fey in the hill as I could. (It was in a safe made of old oak, behind my shoe rack where Bracken couldn't touch it.)

Renny looked good. Her tawny hair had been brushed smooth and braided and she was wearing the gold-yarn sweater with the collar that the sprites had cleaned since the funeral. (It was one of Renny's favorites, but if I outright gave it to her, or knit one for her, she'd move on to other items of my closet). She had even put on a pound or two, so her piquant little face looked softer, and in

general she no longer looked like one of those lost faerie children climbing out of the brush and getting ready to disappear on the wind like a bubble.

"What?" I asked, wondering at this seriousness.

"That's not really how you think of it, is it?" And suddenly I felt like the weight of her happiness depended on my answer.

I thought carefully. "Only when I'm not with one of them. When I'm with them, it feels like..." I remembered that moment in the kitchen, with Green's touch behind me and Bracken's in the front, with Nicky's taste in my mouth and the smooth muscles of taut arms wrapping me in sex and cocooning me in want and nothing seemed wrong, nothing at all, as long as the lot of us were fused together and sated. I jerked my attention back to Renny and tried to still my breathing. "It feels like perfect," I said at last, feeling inadequate.

Renny grinned at me, and I realized she'd been cat so much in her short life that her canines were getting round and pointy. "Excellent," she said, and I had to laugh. "No—really!" she protested. "Because that's the night I wanted to bite Max, and I was sort of hoping it would be like..." She smiled dreamily and just a touch sadly. "I was so out of it, when you guys made the Goddess grove, you know? But I remember that night...I don't remember who I was with, because unless it was Green all that mattered was that it wasn't Mitch, but I remember that it was awesome. I'd like Max to know what that feels like, you know? It's not an everyday thing."

I laughed again, and it was the sweetest, lightest sound that I think I'd made in a hundred years. "You're right," I murmured, feeling comfortable in my own skin for the first time since last night, "It's definitely not an everyday thing."

"You're nervous," she stated wisely.

"Of course I'm nervous!" I said, going back to counting money. "Wouldn't you be?"

"Well yeah—but I'm not you. You do things that terrify me frequently." She smiled slightly, and went back to counting her drawer. "I mean, you took physics!"

"Yeah, well that terrifies me too," I said dryly, and I was the sudden recipient of one of Renny's smiles, and I was dazzled. Bracken and Green talk about what my smiles do to them, and I wondered if either one had seen this

expression on Renny's face before, because if I'd been a man it would have made me weak in every knee but the wee-one.

"I'm glad to hear it," she said happily, "I sure do like you more knowing that you're not always as assured as you seem."

I was way too stunned to reply, and I watched Renny guilelessly count her drawer for another couple of heartbeats before I had the wherewithal to go back to my own business.

And suddenly I was grateful, more than grateful, that the Goddess had given me Renny, my cat-like friend who would comfort me as a giant housecat or as a girlfriend and who knew me and who cared. She was more human than Chloe or Michelle or even than Davy, who had needed to think about her humanity. Renny never thought about what made her human or what made her not—she just responded to good and responded to bad and she thought I was good, and wasn't that all we need in a friend?

"Renny," I said, eyeing her teeny-tiny feet, "If I made you a pair of socks would you remember to take them off before you turned cat?"

She thought about it, glanced at me and nodded. "I'd make it a priority," she said, and I thought that I'd take a look at Grace's sock yarn before we left.

But in spite of Renny's assurance that it was okay to be nervous, and in spite of the men's best efforts to keep me on an even keel and not to tax out my poor, warped emotional operating systems, the next three days crawled by like slugs on Quaaludes. Every time one of them touched me—if Nicky bumped my hand as he walked down the hall, if Bracken spooned me in sleep, if Green rubbed my calf as I sat on the couch and studied—my heart would beat faster and the well between my thighs would gush and my nipples would tingle and my body would go on instant high sexual alert. By unspoken consent we had all agreed no sex after Green had taken me to bed that night (good night!), and the four of us were so high strung and horny that the whole hill felt like it was hovering on the edge of a thunderous sex-storm that would make the running of the grunion look like a game of fish-pattycake.

The tension was at its worst on Wednesday night. The Kings were winning against Golden State in the background, and I sat edgily and tried to study with my back against the arm of the couch. Quiet as a sidhe's ghost, Bracken walked up behind me and put a hand on my shoulder and I shrieked loud enough to

wake a vampire in the daytime. Green was with an appointment—'no sex' between the four of us couldn't possibly stop those—and tonight he was with Ellen Beth, who, it looked like, may just decide to live. However, Nicky, La Mark, Mario, Arturo, Grace, Renny and Max were all relaxing in the front room with me and they all about smacked the ceiling with their feet, knocking over board games, half-filled soda cans and sending a book flying into the air to hit the low-hung ceiling fan and get shot against the back wall of the kitchen.

We all watched the book rebound in a splatter of paper and fall on the blue-tiled floor face first, its pages rumpling beneath it in abandon. I tried to apologize and was giggling too hard to get it out.

"I'm...I'm so...sorr...so...oh fuck it..." I buried my face against my knees and howled with laughter, and everybody's disgusted movements as they cleaned up the mess made me laugh even harder. Finally the last giggle bubbled out and I risked a look up. The room had emptied and it was only Bracken and I, and he was sitting on the end of the couch looking at me sympathetically, his hand hovering above my shin like he was getting ready to rub my leg but was afraid to.

I looked at him, not even sure what expression was on my face, and he nodded reassuringly, like he was soothing a wild animal. "Is it okay if I touch you?"

"Please do." I tried to smile, also reassuringly, but, again, I'm not sure what came out.

His hands came down and rubbed my shins through my jeans, and then my calves and I sighed a little and melted into the couch.

"That's nice," I murmured.

"You've done this before," he said, not referring to his hands passing heat through my jeans.

"It's scarier this time," I said, not talking about that either.

"What makes it scarier?" His face seemed to catch the shadows—what few there were, in Green's warm, well-lit sitting room—and there his eyes and his mouth were darker and grimmer than I knew them to be. But he still didn't look as scary as the feeling of what the four of us would do.

I didn't even need to think about this one. "Part of it is the premeditation. It's killing me. Green, Adrian and I? It was all spontaneous—at least to me...I mean, they could have been planning positions like generals planning attack strategies, but to me, it was all a surprise. This...this just seems so cold blooded, that's all."

"Sort of like...I don't know...date night?" he asked meaningfully, and I cringed.

"Ouch," I said, humbled.

"You did that for me," he said frankly, "Don't feel bad—but we don't need it anymore. You'll find your balance with Nicky, and honestly I think this will help. But as for the rest of it—don't sweat it. It's just touch." He continued the rubbing, moving down to my bare feet and managing to rub sensuously without tickling. "That's all sex is, you know, pleasurable touch."

"Touch squared," I said trying not to be uncomfortable and squeamish, and...and human. "When you touch me...when we touch...it's like..." I remembered that day, after we'd registered for school, "It's like freefall, Bracken, from the tallest, rockiest cliff on the planet. When I touch Green, it's like riding a whale from the depths of the ocean to the top of a jump and crashing into the surf."

"What about Nicky?" he asked curiously, and I searched for an analogy and found one right outside the door.

"It's like walking outside and smelling spring—not quite so spectacular, but lovely, you know?" He nodded, pleased with the comparison, and I went on. "But the thing is...any one of these things is huge and exciting...cliff-diving onto a whale on the first day of spring is going to be a little overwhelming."

His shoulders shook with laughter and then I had to laugh, pressing the back of my hand against my mouth so it wouldn't get hysterical, and when we were done his hands had moved to the back of my knees. "Yeah," he agreed when the laughter had passed, "But remember that when the whale has jumped and spring arrives and you've fallen off that cliff—we'll all be there to catch you."

"Yeah," I nodded, feeling a little better.

"Can I hold you without freaking you out?" His hands stilled on my knees,

and I wondered if we all had really been so high strung that we'd forgotten the simple act of just lying our bodies parallel and breathing in tandem.

"God, Bracken, I wish you would." He stretched full length on the couch and I lay on top of him, savoring his warmth and the hardness of his chest under my cheek and the scent of sun-heated rock that was all Brack.

"So," he said over-casually, "What's your Adrian analogy?"

I had to think for a bit, to remember, because maybe I just wasn't that good with analogies before Adrian had died, or maybe because he'd been gone for almost a year and analogies were the first things to go, but I came up with one. "It was like sitting outside on a perfect summer night, and staring up at a billion bright stars, and his touch was like a breeze just north of cool, and climax was like reaching up to the stars and clutching one, blazing bright and cold."

He thought about it, a slow smile spread over his usually grim, alien features. "Yeah."

"Yeah?"

"Absolutely." There was a pause then. "Are you still scared?"

"I'm never scared when one of you is with me. Even Nicky."

"I'd think especially Nicky," he said and I made a 'hm?' noise so he continued. "Lot's of people are afraid of cliff diving, of whales, of swimming in the ocean. Not a lot of people are afraid of evening in the spring."

"I'm going to make him a vest," I said, hoping Bracken would understand what this meant and why it was important.

"I think that's very wise," he replied, so I guess he did.

"It was Hallow's idea."

"And listening to him is very wise too."

Lying on my beloved was lovely, so restful, so perfect, that I sailed off to sleep that last night before the ritual, listening to his heartbeat, not afraid of anything, least of all being touched by the men who loved me.

School was difficult the next day, and damned if I could remember what, if anything, I learned. I don't think I was alone though—la Mark and Mario (who

were both bunking with the rest of the Avians on ritual night) watched in some amusement as Bracken walked into a metal light pole while he was watching me trip over the bike racks next to it. Renny kept leaving a book or a jacket or a water bottle in her last class and she was actually tired after our run because she kept scampering to her last location to get her stuff, and Nicky apparently spaced out during their Elizabethan lit class and, according to Renny, the professor had to wave a hand in front of his eyes and jump up and down to ask him a simple question about Henry VI. (Nicky's grumpily explained that he was an old English guy who died early after living a very wimpy life that somehow provided fodder for three plays—I figured I'd ask Green about him later.)

It was still light when we came home, but I practically ran out of the SUV as it pulled up because we'd caught every possible red light on our way out of Sacramento, and then had caught the worst of the traffic between Roseville and Auburn. We were late for banquet, and part of my day's mishaps was to step into the world's largest puddle—the one everybody avoids because it's really a pothole by the bike racks in the center of the quad—and I was covered in mud. Bracken had taken the twisty part between Auburn and Green's hill so quickly that I felt bruised from fighting the centrifugal force of keeping the SUV on the road.

I was breathless and flustered as I buzzed through the almost full sitting room towards the hall, waving a hello to everybody there and pausing only long enough to ruffle Graeme's and Gavin's hair and to tell them how glad I was to see them. Steph and Joe were their keepers tonight, and Joe was entertaining the boys with different dog sounds while they waited for Grandma to wake up. He could bark as well in human form as he could when he was a big Labrador retriever—the boys were riveted.

I told the kids to do *exactly* what they were told, and made sure Steph and Joe knew that the boys needed to be spelled to sleep as soon as they'd eaten and put in one of the guest bedrooms with a secure door (they seemed to know this already). Then I scurried away down the hall to my room, where I tore off my clothes in record time and hopped in the shower.

The shower was the best part of my day. It's impossible to be pounded by hot/ warm water without letting some of the tension seep out your feet, and Bracken (or our little sprite/brownie housekeepers) had been very conscientious about putting some really soothing smells in our soap—chamomile, aloe, ocean breeze—whatever, but it was less sweet and more real than the stuff you buy in

stores, and tonight it did its job and chilled me right out.

My mind wandered during my marathon shower, and I let it. I was dressing in front of the bathroom vanity, staring dreamily at my own reflection, having just about gotten to where I'd completely forgotten about what was going to happen after banquet, when Bracken walked in. I smiled at him, feeling relaxed about it. He was Bracken and I loved him and my body was quiet with the shower and it gave him a big happy hello as I saw him in the mirror.

"Hey," he murmured. He took the comb from my fingers and started grooming me like a big gorilla, twirling little ringlets around his fingers, making the whole thing a mess of curls around my face.

"Hey," I said back, and let him do his thing. He bent and kissed the nape of my neck and I shivered and dropped my head to give him better access. He continued, kissing down the backs of my shoulders, then down the curve of my spine. I was wearing a black dress with a mandarin collar and an open back (the better to show off my tattoo) and nearly every kiss hit bare, sensitized skin. I made mmmnnning noises and then he straightened a little and unhooked the collar. The front of the dress fell forward and I wasn't wearing a bra and he put his hands on my naked breasts from behind me, pinching my nipples ever so gently as he did so, and I tried futilely to keep my clothes on my body. I ended up trapping my dress against his hands with my own hands, and as he moved his palms in circles I made a strangled sound in the back of my throat.

"You know..." he murmured in the hollow of my ear, "I saw this comedian once..."

"If he wasn't telling a dirty joke, I don't see where this is going..."

"Give me a chance..." He nipped my earlobe and I gave up the dress struggle, and then I was just facing the naked top half of my little ol' body and his giant beautiful self in the mirror. I looked at him—it was easier—and tried to capture my dress as he unzipped it the rest of the way and slithered it down my hips. "So anyway, this guy was talking about the death penalty and how we needed to make it more humane..."

"This is so romantic," I said, but I couldn't summon any sarcasm because he'd pulled me back against him, and I was wearing pantyhose and nothing else now against the roughness of his jeans, and even through his jeans he was as hard as a rock and suddenly banquet seemed like a burden I couldn't bear.

"Hush...what he said was that instead of making someone wait and wait and wait, just knowing they're going to die because that would be awful, we should just pop our heads into their cells one night and take care of business...bang...the end...that the anticipation was the most awful part..." As he was talking, his hands slid from my breasts down to my now-flat stomach, then under my pantyhose as he started the top rolling, and down past the vee of the juncture of my thighs that I refused to see in the mirror, and then they were down my thighs and he stepped on them and hauled me up by main strength until they popped off my feet. I let him. I reveled in his hands on my waist, and then they slithered down again to palm my inner thighs and my brain was torn between going completely bye-bye and trying to figure out what he was telling me. He turned me in his arms then and kissed me, gently, teasingly, pulling back from me when I wanted more, kissing the corners of my lips, my chin, using his long fingers to tease my spine, my hip, the cleft of my bottom, and I was almost in tears because I wanted him so badly that the world seemed to stop breathing, just so my skin could beg for his touch.

He picked me up then, wrapping my legs around his waist and my tender, aroused sex was abraded by his jeans, and he carried me into the bedroom and I tried to make some sort of protest...we had things to do, and then we had had things we *must* do, and it wasn't going to be like this, not just the two of us, not spontaneous, not wonderful...with another part of my brain I heard my door open and close quickly, and before I could look up and see who had come in, Bracken laid me on the bed and kissed the hollow of my throat and now my eyes crossed under kissed lids with the effort to not lose myself.

"Cory..." he murmured.

"Mmmmmnnnnnnmmmmmmmmmm?" I wanted to be lost.

My beloved smiled, pulling back just enough for me to see his lazy grin.

"Bang," he said, and Green and Nicky joined us on the bed.

ARTURO

Yarn Over

Arturo never let Grace know how hard it was to get Chloe to leave the boys there that night.

Chloe skewed up the driveway in her pale, colossally sized Toyota Tacoma just as Arturo was finishing his walk of the land. He had been making preparations for the banquet all day and had put off his walk until the very end—for one thing, he wanted to be fresh and strong for the ceremony that night. When he'd been a god, they'd had many such ceremonies, and he'd reveled in them. The only thing that gave a god more energy than his subjects fucking each other blind was the slough of joyous births that followed, and he'd always been enthusiastically in favor of both events. There had been other gods who'd taken more joy in the spilled blood than the touch, blood, and song, but blood magic without the touch and the song was dark magic, frightening and uncontrollable, and Arturo had always tried to be a merciful god.

He'd be the first to admit, though, that in the merciful god department, he didn't hold a candle to Green.

For instance, he would have killed Chloe weeks ago for torturing his beloved the way Chloe was torturing Grace. But then Grace would never have forgiven him, so it was probably a very good thing that Arturo wasn't in charge. That's what he'd told himself when Green had changed the power flow in the hill, and nothing had happened since to change his mind. Cory's ups and downs didn't bother him—she was young, and just as it had been hard for him to adjust to being a subordinate to Green, it would be difficult for her to adjust to being a goddess. Arturo had no doubts whatsoever that Cory would someday achieve immortality, but unlike Green, he was not looking forward to the day. He'd seen it happen before, to humans he'd loved, and he knew that the Goddess had a way of balancing the universe. Not one of the humans who'd become immortal wouldn't have traded their immortality for the thing they'd sacrificed to get it. Not one. The problem was, the immortality was usually a sort of consolation prize, given for something *truly* valuable, and Arturo didn't want to see Cory go through that sort of pain. But he did want to serve under her for longer than a mortal lifetime, so he wasn't planning on telling any of them about his doubts.

And speaking of sacrifices...

Chloe squealed to a halt, spewing gravel, and threw herself out of the truck with force. If he'd have told her then that she looked exactly like her mother, she may have lunged for his throat, but it was true nonetheless, and even Arturo knew she had a right to be pissed, even if she couldn't put her finger on why.

He'd had to compel her over the phone, using all of the formidable power

in his control, to get her to leave the boys for the night and then turn around and go back to the hotel she'd been staying at. Grace had been paying Chloe and absurd amount for working in the store in order to keep her nearby until the situation was settled. Chloe was in possession of dangerous knowledge, and unless her attitude towards her mother changed in a hurry, that was knowledge they were going to have to strip her of because she couldn't be allowed to walk around knowing not only who lived at Green's hill but how to get there as well. They had been lucky so far that she hadn't brought anyone who didn't belong there, but given her simmering anger, Arturo didn't know how long that situation would last.

So tonight, she'd been spelled to come and drop the boys off, and she didn't know why, and she didn't know why she couldn't resist the compulsion, and that would have made Arturo angry too. But he still didn't sympathize with her. She hurt Grace, and that flushed all his sympathy down the crapper without queries, questions, or comments.

So now, as she stalked out of the car, Arturo approached Gavin and Graeme with a smile—he'd noticed that Graeme, the younger, was adventurous and precocious, and oddly protective of his older brother who did not share these traits. Graeme reminded him a lot of Grace, and Gavin was too sweet a child not to adore on his own. He did not spare even a glance for Chloe, not even when he thanked her perfunctorily for bringing the boys.

"Why do they need to be here, Arturo?" Her voice was waspish, and now he eyed her with distaste.

"You've put them in danger by tracking your mother down. We're doing something tonight that will keep them safe."

"Does my mother know I'm not invited?" She gave him a look that was pure sixth grade Queen Bee, and he had a moment's remorse. She could have been so much like Grace, if only she had chosen the right parts of her character instead of the angry parts.

"Yes," Arturo answered levelly, making sure she understood the full implications. Her lips parted, and her eyes widened, and for a moment, just a moment, he could see the hurt child that she had been.

"You're lying," she denied.

"I can't lie," he said, surprised. "It would make me ill." He thought for a moment. "The vampires...they can lie...and so can the weres, but to my knowledge they try not to, just like we try not to know their full names. Nobody wants an unfair advantage here."

Her eyes had narrowed, and she was suddenly pure bitch again. "I don't know what in the hell you're talking about."

"You don't want to know." He bent down to the boys and winked conspiratorially. "Hey—your grandmother wants you to go upstairs and wreck your dinner with whatever's in the refrigerator. I think Joe and Steph are up there, if you want to go see..." It was apparently what they wanted to hear, because Graeme gave him a hug and Gavin jumped up and down and they both raced up the stairs for the hamburgers and spice-fried potatoes he knew Grace had left special instructions to make for the boys. The fact was, the only one who thought the group of lovers would make it to banquet that night was Cory.

"Why wouldn't my mother want to protect me too?" Chloe asked, and now a little bit of sympathy actually slipped through.

"You don't want our protection, Chloe," he responded at his gentlest. "You don't want your mother's love. You want her to suffer for dying..."

"Leaving..."

"*Dying.*" He sighed and ran his hands through his black as black hair. "Your mother's story is legend, Chloe. She sat out on her porch for an entire summer and *longed*...simply *yearned* to live long enough to watch you grow up. Adrian flew by and heard that yearning from three hundred feet up, and landed, and talked to your mother. His mother had sold him into slavery when he was a child—your mother, with her fierce love, her yearning to see you grow into a woman...she enchanted him. And she almost didn't make it after her transition—that part we don't talk about. She almost died of a broken heart until she took on the whole hill as her children, and we let her. We *loved her* for it. And now, here you are, talking of pain and of anger, and you're taking the love she had for you and your sister, the love that has made the lives of our entire hill wonderful, and you're spitting it back in her face. What you don't understand is that this time, you won't break her heart, because if you don't want her love, we'll take it. We'll *revere* that love. It is you who will yearn and yearn and yearn and not realize that you're the one that killed what you wanted most."

Chloe took in a sharp breath, and looked longingly after her children as though she wished she could go snatch them from the doorway and take them far far away. "This isn't my fault," she whispered.

"Tell your mother," Arturo bit out. "You've broken her heart, and I've had to pick up the pieces."

"You're too young for her." She was searching for reasons to be angry, and this one was too absurd for words.

"I'm actually much older," he understated. Then, more seriously, "Your mother's illness was not your fault, and neither was her death. What you are doing with your chance to know her now? That is entirely on you, little girl. You may either grow up, or grow old without her, but make your mind up quickly."

"Why—what can you people do to me?" But she was gnawing on her nail, a habit she had picked up from her mother actually, and he knew she was not as insouciant as she appeared.

He told her the truth—it was all he could do—and he still regretted it later. "We can make you forget," he said simply, and watched her face whiten with shock. "Now go away," he ordered. Cory and the others were due home soon, and he didn't want them to worry about this situation...the bill was tightly enough wound as it was.

For a moment the child Grace had loved stared nakedly out at him, and for a moment he was tempted to love her as Grace did. She looked hurt, and confused, and desperate, and he'd seen that look on Cory's face too many times to just write Chloe off as a lost cause. But where Cory would have filled with resolve, or with remorse, or compassion, when Chloe's expression changed it did not change to understanding.

Her eyes narrowed, and her lip curled, and Arturo realized he'd made a mistake somehow in his dealing with her, but he couldn't figure out where.

"You go ahead and make me forget you bastard," she hissed. "But I'll be damned if you'll be able to forget about me." And with that she jumped into the truck and peeled out of the driveway. Five minutes later, Bracken peeled into the driveway and Arturo breathed a sigh of relief. They had just missed each other and he could only be grateful.

The boys had eaten by the time he got up there, and after Cory's breathless

greeting he took them to a small guest room that he'd outfitted specially with a new X-Box of some number and as many games as he could find, and sat down to play with them. For about a half an hour he competed fiercely, listened to the boys cheer, and encouraged them to try again when they failed. Graeme was the better player—but Arturo noted he let his brother win sometimes. He thought for a moment of Adrian and Bracken and felt his heart sproing hard, like a tightly wound steel string breaking with resonance, and it was with great regret that he took the controls from Gavin and, while Graeme was setting up the next game, thought drowsy thoughts until the sandy brown eyelashes fluttered to his freckled cheeks, and he flopped gently backwards onto the bed next to him. Arturo finished the game (it was some game where wildly animated cars zoomed around a race track—he enjoyed it very much) and then moved Gavin up on the bed, listening to Graeme's indignant monologue on how *he* would *never* fall asleep when they were company, and how *he* wanted to see the vampires again more than anything.

"Well," Arturo said, feeling more than a little bit bad about this very necessary deception, "He may miss the vampires at banquet, but tomorrow there will be pastries downstairs as well, and I'll bet he'll see more sidhe and were-animals in one place than he's ever dreamed of."

Graeme took in an excited breath. "Will we? I like the were-animals...and the sidhe, too, of course Arturo." He added that last dutifully, but Arturo knew that to the little boy, sidhe were just odd looking people. Still, he'd made the effort and Arturo was touched.

"I'll tell you what, boy," he said gently, "Tomorrow when you wake up, I promise to take you with me when I walk the hill. I'll carry you and your brother on my shoulders and we can run like giants, and then you will enjoy the sidhe as much as the were-creatures, yes?"

"Is that a promise, Arturo?" Graeme asked wistfully. "Because Mom keeps promising to take us home, and dad's mad at her for staying so long, but she keeps staying here and staying here and I like you and everything but..." He bit his lip, an adult sadness creeping over his long-boned little boy's face. Graeme had rusty brown hair and milk chocolate eyes, and of the two of them was the most like Grace, and Arturo was determined to give him something wonderful to remember because he had the feeling that Chloe would fester with bitterness, bad memory or no memory. Some people were just destined to nurse their own splinters until they infected the soul.

"That is a promise, little man," he said formally. "And you know what happens to us when we don't keep our promises?"

Graeme shook his head gravely.

"We totally puke out our guts all over our shoes." Arturo suppressed a smile as he borrowed Cory's vernacular. An awed smile broke out over Graeme's features, and Arturo felt better for what he was about to do.

"Really?" The little boy asked, and Arturo nodded, accepting the spontaneous hug from him with another spring in his heart.

"Really truly," he said, and while Graeme's face was hidden over his shoulder, he spelled him to sleep. The little head got heavy all of a sudden, and the breathing came evenly through the soft pink lips. Arturo leaned forward, taking his weight in the hand near the bed, and settled him down next to his brother, then eyed the two of them, side by side, breathing evenly, little pieces of his Grace, lodged in his heart just as surely. He begrudged every moment their mother spent with them that Grace would not.

By the time he emerged from the guest room, Grace was awake, frantically bustling around the kitchen, and banquet was underway. Unless you had been born and raised sidhe, this particular banquet was no place for children. As Arturo came down the stairs he found himself smiling at the various stages of dress and lack thereof among the diners. They would eat formally—Green had never favored the massive orgies that had been indulged in by Titania and Oberon, two rulers he had particularly disliked—but there was no doubt in anybody's mind as to what would happen after they had eaten.

He smiled down the table at a shyly seductive Renny, dressed in emerald baby-doll satin. She blushed at Arturo's wink and then smiled coyly at a very nervous Max, who was wearing black jeans and a black silk shirt. Max smiled back at her, and he looked as besotted as Mitch ever had. Arturo was suddenly very, very glad he hadn't kicked the young cop out this summer when he'd thought he was in love with Cory. There was a core of decency to the man that Arturo had to respect—even if he'd found Max's sister too annoying to be allowed to even remember her night in the hill.

He sat at the head of the table—tonight, he was the ranking leader, but everyone knew what Cory and her lovers were doing as they ate and nobody cared who was leading the banquet, so Arturo felt free to sit back and watch the

flirting, the seduction, the play of aggression and retreat that built up the static at a banquet until when the participants touched, the charge it released sent ripples of electricity through everyone else in the room.

At last Grace walked down the stairs wearing a cream colored pantsuit with a tie that went right under her full, soft breasts and a flounced bottom, and Arturo got a hard-on that would have shattered solid rock.

Goddess, how he wanted this woman.

She was still bustling, ordering sprites and nymphs in serving and cleanup, although in breathless twos and threes and even (in the case of the vampires) of five at the least, the banquet room had started clearing out. Cory had still been in the shower when Arturo had left the boy's room, but Bracken had been about to open the door to the bedroom. He'd flashed a nervous, excited, sex-saturated smile as Arturo had passed, and Arturo had winked at him in turn, having every faith that the three men would manage just fine. And now, he had no more thought for Bracken, or Nicky or even Green and Cory, short of what their activities could give him now, if only his damned stubborn woman would leave things be for just this once.

He could wait no longer...the thundercloud feeling of anticipation was growing laden and heavy, and he walked up behind her, giving a significant look to Bracken's mother, Blissa, who giggled at him and scurried away to be with Crocken, then grabbed her hips and pulled her against him without subtlety or finesse.

"Woman, you are making me crazy!" He growled in her ear, and was rewarded with a sideways look from her fine brown eyes, and a glance away. She hadn't fed—her skin stayed pale and cool—and the possibilities of that made his growl rougher.

"There's more to do..." she said lowly, and he kissed her neck, next to the dark red curls she'd sculpted against her head. He wanted to run his fingers through them and make them wild and hazy around her face, but first he had to get her into her room.

"It will be done when you rise tomorrow night..." he murmured into that hollow of her neck where the flesh was just so.

"You want me to just leave it?" She tried for asperity, but what came out

was a breathless plea to let it be okay, this once, to serve herself before her family.

"Oh yes...by all means leave it," he rasped, the edge of impatience making the suggestion an order. He calmed himself down, and tried another tack. "Or you could clean it up, all by your lonesome while I watch you with hungry eyes...but in the meantime, Cory and her lovers are in her bed, and do you know what they are doing?"

"Unnhh?" Grace moaned, and Arturo turned her towards the stairway, then he whispered, in exact detail, how Cory was pleasuring and being pleased by the three men who loved her most.

She beat him up the stairs and into her room, but not by much, and then he took charge. He loved her body—he would have loved it more if it had been warm, but her heart was so warm that he could live with the coldness of the skin. Her stomach was soft and baggy and carried the marks of two children on it, *Chloe, that snot, was ten and a half pounds...we had to break her collarbone to get her out of there*, and her breasts were softly stretched mouthfuls. Her skin, when she'd been alive, had been tinted with honey, and in death there was the memory of that soft, warm gold in her freckles, in the brownness of her aureole, in the tan that lingered after more than twenty years, on the tops of her thighs and the backs of her hands. Dusty sunshine, diet soda, sugar cookies and cool lake water—all the things that Cory could taste when she tasted Grace's blood were there in the place between her thighs that wept when he kissed it, and kiss it he did. She closed her eyes when he tasted her, because she loved him and was afraid of what she'd see in his eyes if she opened them, and then he made her open them when he surged inside of her, into that cool, moist, tight place that gripped him and pulled at him until he wanted to pour his warmth into it and make it beat with the sound of his own heart. She groaned, quietly, because she tried not to make much noise when their bodies were meshed and pounding, and he delighted in making her scream.

And he knew what she wanted now, because she had fasted just for him, because he'd asked her to, and her eyes were flared in passion, and even as she moaned she was scenting his skin and the sweet, sweet elfin ichor that ran underneath...she wanted...she wanted...and she clenched around him, begging with her body, and he heaved above her, his smile taunting.

"Say it..." he demanded, his voice rough with sex.

"Please..." Grace was breathless, and her lip curled in a half-smile that left her fangs extended and he grinned wickedly feral back at her.

"Say it..."

"Goddess...oh please..."

"What do you want..."

"I want to *feed*..." And with that she lunged upward, locking her teeth into his artery, clamping her lips down and drawing, needing him like mortals needed breath, and he screamed with the power of it...

And Cory came...the power washing through the walls of the hill, through their skin, into their loins, making them safe, making them whole...making them climax like a strike of lightning, like thunder through their hearts, making them shudder and scream in each other's arms as the shivers of orgasm washed over them again and again and again, endlessly, until they lay, washrag limp and spent, Arturo's blood and sweat and come coating Grace like the life that she'd wanted badly enough to die for.

Arturo had to catch his breath, and when it was caught, he saw his beloved lying still. She usually breathed, because she was still a young enough vampire to have muscle memory that insisted she do just that, but now, she simply lay stiller than death, unblinking, unbreathing, unbeating...until Arturo kissed the skin at the crux of her arms just to make her gasp.

"Sorry..." She was full of his blood now, the sweetest of wines to a vampire, and she blushed with it. "I'm sorry, beloved..."

He drew in his breath, and she bit her lip—no fangs extended, just white teeth, sucked clean of his blood. "You've never said that..."

"I should." She turned to face him, her fine brown eyes clear and her face as soft as her body. "I should have called you beloved last summer, when we first...the night the Goddess grove was made," she said earnestly.

"Good night," he grinned, and she rolled her eyes.

"Exceptional," she said dryly. "Which would make tonight..."

Arturo shuddered delicately, like a cat, with too many emotions to count. "Spectacular," he breathed. "Terrifying...to bind people with loyalty, like they

did this winter...that was something...but to bind them with safety..."

Grace nodded, a convulsive swallow working her throat. "It's the one promise a parent can't make to a child," she agreed, taking a self-conscious swipe at the blood trickling from her lips, then licking her fingers. "We can promise them good schools and love and time to play and allowance...but safety...the binding of flesh and blood against evil..." She shook her head. "It's haunting that we can't promise that."

"Yes." And he hadn't been able to filter the sadness out of his voice. She looked at him sharply, just looked, and he felt his misgivings unpacking themselves from his heart. "Their power...what they can do...it doesn't come without a price, Grace...and Green's pinned his hopes on her immortality..." His voice broke a little, and he was *shocked* because he'd thought he had contained these worries so well.

"Shhh..." she murmured, stroking the side of his face. "Sh..." She didn't try to reassure him beyond that, but when his breathing quieted, she smiled softly at him, tilting her face to the side as she lay on her back. "They will have children," she said, the hope in her voice painful to hear.

"Yes." He smiled brilliantly, silver caps, white teeth, hope.

"I want to raise their children. And if Cory becomes immortal, she can still keep having them, right?"

"Yes." He laughed a little, with the sound of her glee.

"I will tend her children, one after another, into immortality, and you will be by my side," Grace proclaimed, as poetic as she ever became. She didn't even ask the question of the last part, and Arturo's smile became lazy and self-satisfied. At last, the woman believed she was his.

"Then we'll make it okay," she answered simply. "Whatever the sacrifice, we can have hope."

Arturo nodded. "And sex," he growled. The hill, the air, the walls, the earth...all of it cried out that the promise of flesh and power was still vibrating with impending fulfillment.

"Goddess I hope so," Grace prayed, and moved to kiss him, to lick from his chin downward, to taste him, and the night spun on.

A breath away from dawn she nudged him from a light sleep, and he groaned. "Beloved, it's almost time," she whispered.

"No," he said, and wrapped his arms around her body which felt warm now, after all they'd done.

"Arturo..." She was getting stern. "You know what could happen if you're here at dawn." It had happened to Adrian and Cory—it had changed Cory's life forever.

"Mark me, woman," he growled against her neck. "Mark me, and mark me and mark me, and maybe someday I'll trade my immortality for your life."

"Arturo!" she gasped, and tried to wriggle to face him, but he wouldn't let her, and although both of them were supernaturally strong, he was older and stronger.

"Lie still..." he said, surprised now to find his throat clogged with tears. He was three thousand years old, and he wept, on average, once every two-hundred years. He had thought Adrian's death had wrung him dry. "Lie still, and I'll lie next to you, and we'll pretend we're like human lovers, and that dawn is a time for hope."

"Oh..." No words. His beloved was caught without words, and that alone was worth having the mark of her soul with its sacrifices and its pain and its regret.

He leaned over, and she turned her head then, and he kissed her, long, lingering, playing with her fangs as they emerged, cutting his tongue on them, knowing the cuts would heal in a moment. They were kissing when dawn came, and she made a stunned, protesting sound, and then her flesh went still and her soul, more beautiful and shining than the sun shearing through the canyon below the house, melted through him, and he could smell her and taste her and hear her rough voice in his blood and his veins and his pores and his heart...

He made a shocked sound of loss when she was gone, and her body was dead weight in his arms. He kissed her cooling cheek then, and lay her down in the bed, arranging her so she would rise comfortably, without mussed hair or a pillow dent in her cheek. Then he climbed out of bed and got dressed to walk the land. He went to wake the boys, and although Gavin mumbled and rolled over, Graeme forced himself to wake up. He perched on Arturo's shoulders and

respected the request for silence and the two of them rushed across the earth of the hill, the unlikely red dirt that sprouted soft green grass and amazing flowers in every color. Arturo would occasionally nudge him and give a quiet point when he saw the other sidhe, greeting the dawn with quiet meditation and bare feet.

He saw Green and Bracken, in the distance as he went walking, their gaits so companionable there could be no question but that they had shared something important the night before, but he didn't approach them. He would have told Graeme (had the boy asked) that he was too wrapped in his own thoughts. He told himself that he was still absorbing the alien texture of Grace's mark on his soul the warmth of her that he did not get from her body. However, Green, had he known it, had seen him wipe tears from his cheeks that he hadn't known he shed; Graeme couldn't see his face from his perch in the clouds.

CORY

K4tog

I was naked and they were not, and our first few moments were a breathless flurry of hands on jean buttons and wiggling out of socks and tossing underwear onto the light fixtures until everywhere I turned was smooth, warm skin over wiry or bulky or sleek muscles until I felt engulfed by them, swallowed by men, frantic with the need to feel their skin all over mine.

I lost track of who had his mouth on my breast, on the softness of my stomach, the sweetness between my thighs, but it went on and on until my skin became electric like a field of buzz so the kiss on my shoulder, on my neck, on my stomach was as exquisite as the tongue on my nerve bundle, bursting with yes. I knew who was kissing me, and when I tasted me squared on Bracken's lips after quivering to the point of scream as he delved into the juncture of my thighs and tasted the firing of orgasmic neurons, I groaned and whimpered, even with his tongue in my mouth, because I wanted to taste them too, but there was not enough of me, only one mouth of me, only too much of my skin to be stroked to be nipped to be pleased and laved.

He kissed me and kissed me until I was drowning in us and then I was being rolled, turned, so that I was straddling his lap and his body was so deep inside of mine that I could feel him against my cervix, deep, stopped by the physical, pushing, trying to reach even further. I howled into his shoulder with

the pleasure, the aching, wonderful pain of being invaded by him, and then Green kissed the nape of my neck and just knowing what he was doing, where he was going to be, made the pressure of power build in my womb, in my lungs, in my stomach and he hadn't even...I was being stretched...and he was almost going to...

Oh Goddess...there he was...and he was inside of me...they were inside of me and they were moving and the world was fracturing and the power was building and stronger and stronger and *oh Goddess* my lungs were crushed my body was crushed my sex was crushed *Christ! let me...oh...please...* by the weight of their bodies *they were...oh...ah gods...* inside of my body, the coming together of lovers, beloveds, *ou'e'hm* and *due'alle*, the unity of us...

And Nicky, *ou'e'alle*, lover who owed me his allegiance touched my hair from the side and I almost wept because I knew the logistics, the plain necessity of the coming together of the four of us, and I couldn't do it...it was too much...and my control began to splinter and my body began to shake and a helpless scream of unraveling was loosening in my chest and the power threatened to burst me, to explode from my skin like deadly rain and if I had to...*if I tasted...I couldn't... oh don't make me...I needed...I needed...* the glow of my panic was pressing against me, tinting Bracken's skin with blue *no, no no no...please Nicky give me some...*

... and then Nicky did an amazing thing.

He turned my head to the side and he kissed me.

Such a simple thing, a kiss, his tongue, tasting of me, tasting of Green, slipping into my mouth, and I was suddenly not just a vessel for power, not just an explosion of pleasure, I was me again, I was me with the men I loved and we were rising, rising, building, crashing, crescendoing exploding into climax and the scream I loosed into his mouth wasn't unraveling it was becoming...

Safe...whole...united... I thought, and the pressure built into my chest like a cosmic tidal wave unleashed on a solar system and my body shook with the force of orgasm and the four of us, bound up in my body, released power that rolled in electromagnetic pulse waves throughout the hill...and rolled and rolled and pushed through the bodies of the men into the bodies under the hill, binding everybody we loved, all those under our protection, into their blood, through their skin, inoculating them against the infection of anger, of wanting, of endless soul-wrecking need that was our enemy, and binding them within their own

selves, individuals, unable to be breached or violated, and we were safe, those under this hill, we were safe and I was still in the freefall of orgasm, still riding the shaking, trembling, crashing wave of the holy dark and I became aware that Green was whispering to me, his chest smooth and warm against my back, that Bracken was whispering to me, and my hands were clenched in his shoulders, his skin soft against the hard muscles and collarbones, and that Nicky had broken off the kiss and had splashed over my body, against my side, when I had invaded the hill with sex. I had done it, we had done it, we had come together as one and they were catching me, they were holding me, and I was still myself.

I collapsed forward against Bracken, drained of everything including the will to move, and my eyes closed and I was dimly, only dimly aware of the wetness running down my thighs, between my bottom, against my side, and of busy fingers tracking it over my skin. I caught a glimpse of Bracken, grim mouth pursed as he concentrated, and then my eyes closed because I was too spent to move, but I knew that they were naming me with words upon my skin. They named me in their hearts, with all the ways they could name me, could scrawl me on my own body with their seed and I lost track of moments in the little tickly pleasure of being touched this way until Green was inside of me again and I washed us both in a final, trembling come.

At one time I was held against a hard chest in a shower, as hands moved over me and made me clean, but I mostly remember my surprise when later, after I was bathed and dressed in Green's T-shirt and asleep between Bracken and Green, when all was done, and the ritual completed, I was still me.

I woke up sometime near dawn, and Green and Bracken had left to walk the land, and Nicky and I were in each other's arms.

I moaned a little, contented and happy, and burrowed deeper into Nicky. His hand came up hesitantly, pushing my hair from my face and I leaned into his caress, accepting it. He grew bolder, leaned his head down, his lips hovering just inches from mine, and I opened my eyes enough to see him, serious, yearning, trying so hard not to take too much for granted.

I loved Nicky too.

I kissed him, and then he kissed me back, and I pulled away although he tried to follow me, and kissed my way down his naked mortal body, reveling in the reality of freckles, and small moles and cinnamon colored nipples, a pale stomach that contrasted with the backs of his hands and the lighter tan of his

arms. Dark, rust-colored hair covered his arms and was starting to sprinkle his chest and that trail eventually led down to his phallus and tickled my nose as I tasted him—he tasted of soap and sleep. He groaned tightly, but I was still in the mood for teasing, so I moved my way towards lighter hair that covered his calves and his thighs, and I kissed those too.

Finally he grunted and rolled me to my back and spent a heaven's moment licking my sex, burying his head between my thighs and then kissing up under my T-shirt to my mouth. I remembered our last time together, and that thing I forgot and I tried to say something to him now and what came out was, "Nicky...baby..." but he knew, bless him, he knew. "They'll will it to wait..." he murmured. "I asked." And I was grateful, so grateful, because I could have waited for birth control, but I didn't have to, so I wrapped my legs around his slender hips, happy at how well he fit. He sheathed himself inside of me and I groaned and wiggled, and closed my eyes and stroked his chest and he pounded, intense for a moment, his golden bird's eyes popping as he poured himself into me and I groaned at the pleasant tingle that took over my body as he finished.

He pulled away from me and I rolled into his arms, making happy little mmming sounds. "That kiss last night..." I murmured, because I wanted him to know, "That was brilliant—it was exactly what I needed when I needed it...thank you..."

"My pleasure," he said sincerely, and I rubbed his chest, enjoying the unfamiliar feel of the hair beneath my palms, even as I fell inexorably asleep.

"Nicky?" I said, wanting to remember this before I went.

"Mmm..."

"Date night is officially dead."

"Praise the Lord," he breathed happily, and I smiled as we fell back asleep, breathing in tandem.

Not long afterwards, Bracken and Green came back to bed, Bracken crawling in behind me and Green spooning behind Nicky.

"What have you been doing?" Bracken asked suggestively into my ear. He reached over to my hand and played with my fingers, twining them and circling them, and I clenched his hand in mine and smiled in my sleep.

"Making love," I mumbled. "All good?"

"All great."

And then we closed our eyes and slept until almost noon.

I woke as Arturo reached around a still sleeping Green and Nicky to tap me on the shoulder. I squinted at him, trying to make sense of my surroundings and to put a finger on the urgency that had Arturo—dignified, handsome-as-sin Arturo—practically doing the pee-pee dance in agitation.

"Wha's wrong?" I slurred, tugging at the comforter to make sure it was up around my chest because my T-shirt had rucked up during that lovely moment with Nicky.

"Your mother's here," he said lowly, and I forgot my bare boobs and sat bolt upright in bed.

"My mother's what?" My parents had been to the hill before, but part of Green's protection to the hill was to put a geas on it—a spell of hazy memory, so that no outsider would remember it if they ever found it.

"Chloe brought her," Arturo hissed angrily and I swore. Of course—we'd rescinded the geas for Chloe because we knew we could wipe her memory if it didn't work. "They're out in the living room right now, cooking up enough bitch to choke a moose. We need you out there."

"Holy shit." I scrambled out of bed, too rattled to even see if I'd woken anybody else. "We're in Green's room. How did we get in Green's room? We started out in my room, did we migrate? Were we naked? Did we just materialize here?"

"Does it matter?" Arturo asked, putting a hand on my shoulder to keep me from looking around in a complete attack of frantic.

"It does if I don't keep any clothes in here Arturo!" I exploded, wondering if I should feel like a guilty kid after that wonderful moment of powerful woman I had just pulled off. "We're right across the hall and my mom can see me run over to my room to get dressed and I'm about to confront my very human mother in a T-shirt after leaving the bed with three naked men..." He put another hand on the other shoulder and breathed deeply, nodding so I would do the same because I was losing it big time. There was something different about Arturo this

morning...something gold and rust colored, a glowing from him...I closed my eyes and focused, figuring I'd get to that other thing later. "Short answer, yes. It matters. But that's okay. I'll deal...I'll just run across the hall when she's not..."

"Cory, are you in here?" She sounded irritated as she shoved the door open — its seal had been broken by Arturo who was always welcome. Of course she sounded irritated. Chloe, the bitch, had been intercepting her phone calls for almost a month, and now she was hunting me down in my own home.

"Looking," I finished weakly. "You're so fired as a doorman," I hissed at Arturo and he smiled gently and dropped a kiss on my forehead before I turned to my mother with a sickly smile.

"Hey mom," I said lamely, and behind me I heard all three naked men sit up and murmur things like "oh shit" and "fuck-it-all" under their breath. "We were just getting dressed and coming out to meet you." And at least that was the truth.

Mom took in the scene with narrowed eyes and a rapidly reddening face. "Corinne Carol-Anne Kirkpatrick..."

"Op Crocken Green," I finished for her, deciding that since I was busted I was going to be busted for the whole enchilada, and Mom could make of my life what she wished.

"What?"

"My name," I said bravely—I hoped. "My full name here is Corinne Carol-Anne Kirkpatrick op Crocken Green. Bracken's full name is Bracken Brine Granite op Crocken Green," I turned and indicated my beloved who had caught a towel thrown by Arturo and was standing up looking as decent as he could. The tattooed wreath of oak, lime and rose that wrapped his wrist stood out sharply against the white of the towel. I turned to Green who had managed a pair of jeans from beside the bed, and he gave me the gentlest, proudest, most compassionate smile, and I managed to return it in kind. "And you already know Green."

"And this young man?" She leveled a finger at Nicky who had stood too, and next to Green he truly did look young—or at least short, at a bare five foot six or seven next to Green's full near seven feet. His tattoo was on his arm, and all that ink made them look dangerous. I squinted at the sidhe, even Arturo and

realized that none of them were wearing glamour. So this was really full disclosure today, I thought, and felt a little relieved.

"Dominic Kestrel Kirkpatrick Green," Nicky said, raising his eyebrows at me. I smiled a little, hoping I could give him my true gratitude later.

Mom nodded, clearly not understanding. "Nice," she snapped, "And what in the hell are they all doing with you in bed?"

"It's Green's bed," I said automatically, stalling for time.

"I don't care if it's the President's bed, what in the hell are you doing there with three naked men?" Her voice rose to a shriek at the end.

Oh Goddess...this was going downhill fast and I was starting to think I would have to throw my body in front of it to make it stop. "I think Bracken's wearing shorts," I said inanely, and then shoved my fist in my mouth and bit down to try and keep anything else that stupid from coming out.

"Cory, if you don't give me a decent answer right now, I'm calling your father and he's going to drag you home by the hair and commit you to a goddamned nuthouse now what in the hell are all these men doing in your bed!"

I was fucked blind if anyone, even my father, was going to take me out of my bed, with my men. I took a deep breath and let it out on a sigh. "We're married, mom—where would you expect to find us all?"

"You keep saying that, but I don't see a..." she trailed off, and I looked guiltily to where a ring should be, only to discover that there was one on my finger. It was beautiful. The tattoo on my back consisted of three interwoven diamonds of oak, lime, and rose, framing the insignias of Bracken, Nicky, and Adrian. The ring was the same thing, except the diamonds were horizontal not vertical, and the center diamond had Green's lime tree with emerald inlays for the limes, in the tiniest detail. Adrian's rose was only there in the wreaths. Lime leaves, oak leaves and roses with tiny blood rubies in the center created the lattice weaving that made up the diamonds, and there was a hawk, with a tiny topaz as its eye for Nicky. Bracken's symbol was a sword thrust into a rock, and the sword had an onyx handle and a diamond blade, with garnet blood dripping from the (migosh!) honest granite of the tiny boulder. It was small, for all the minute detail, and the gold was colored red and gold and white as it wreathed, and the beauty of it caught my breath, because I must have been truly asleep

when Bracken or Green or Nicky had placed it on my finger.

A little awestruck, I showed my mother, who actually stopped, mid-rant, and gasped.

"It's beautiful," she breathed, and I turned to Bracken with a radiant smile.

"It's perfect," I told him, and he bowed slightly, waving his left hand. He had one too. I looked to Green and then to Nicky and realized that probably when the men had come to bed, they had placed rings on all our fingers. I didn't think the elves did jewelry...especially Green, who couldn't afford to owe his allegiance to anybody. But he'd chosen to wear this symbol, for me. For all of us. My eyes grew wide and bright. "They're perfect, aren't they?" I asked, and Green nodded. "Absolutely," he murmured, and I wished I had time, so I could get a better look at everybody's ring, and praise Bracken for his creativity and...

And my mom was still looking at me like I was about to be disowned.

"See," I said brightly, "We have rings!"

"You *all* have rings?" she asked acidly, and I gave it up and decided to own my love life.

"Yup." I nodded my head and did that weird thing with my lips that dared her to make a big deal out of it. "We all have rings. We're all bound together, mom. I could explain and totally lose you, but what matters is that we're happy. All four of us are happy, and this is more of a lifetime commitment than you can possibly imagine. It's more permanent and lasting than any marriage ceremony, and we must make it work. So we are—and we're happy, and there will be children..." I smiled, and I realized that my face had gone soft and a sweet smile had moved through me. "Not right now—not until I'm done with school...but they'll be pretty, mom—the prettiest children you've ever seen. And we'll love them...they'll be so loved...and we'll be happy."

I was crying. Holy shit, first I got all soft over the thought of children and now I was crying! What in the hell was wrong with me? I wiped my face with a shaking hand and realized there were black spots in front of my eyes and my knees were suddenly a little weak. Green was there to catch me before I could even sit down on the bed.

"You're hungry," he said, nuzzling my cheek, and I nodded, surprised.

"I don't remember this from last summer," I said fuzzily, and Bracken moved up to Green's side and laughed.

"I do," he said shortly. "It felt like I spent half the summer forcing cheeseburgers down your gullet..." He sobered. "And the other half just begging you to eat at all."

Mom made a restive sound, and we looked at her, me from my familiar perch in a beloved's arms. "See mom?" I said with another Jell-o smile, "They're taking good care of me...I guess I am that special after all."

She opened and closed her mouth, and I gnawed on my lip and tried to do my job. "Mom, I'm sure there's something in the kitchen to eat—do you want to have lunch?"

"I came with Chloe..." she said uncertainly, and I cut her off.

"Chloe's leaving tonight, with the kids, and she's not coming back." Mom looked at me in surprise. "I bet you called like fifty times, right?"

Mom nodded. "I was hurt—I didn't think you were planning the wedding at all," she said honestly. "I still don't know how you're going to plan a wedding for four," she said with a snort, and I guessed she hadn't figured out what she wanted to say about that.

"You'll have to talk to Bracken about the wedding plans," I said, and my beloved looked up happily, like this was a topic he didn't get to discuss enough. "He's been doing most of it on his own while I sleep. But Chloe kept your calls from me out of spite—and she's not welcome back here. So if you'll let us get dressed, we'll be out in a second for lunch."

Mom nodded, still thin lipped and bewildered, but I guess some of the authority that I'd developed in the last year had leaked into my voice, and she did what I said. After the door closed behind her, the four of us were left to look at each other shakily, and Green laughed with so much joy in his voice I couldn't even be sorry.

"Well, luv, I'd say we're effectively out of the closet," he said bluntly, sitting down with me in his lap.

"Goddess," I sighed and lay my head on his chest. Bracken motioned to Nicky and they left to go get dressed. "I didn't think I'd ever tell her, Green," I

said, dazed. "I thought I'd be someone different for my parents for the rest of my life."

"You can't box parts of your life from the people you love," Green offered wisely, and I laughed, because I came to that conclusion all by myself, but it was wonderful to hear it seconded.

"I love you more than the sound of my heartbeat," I told him gravely. "Now dress me and feed me before I pass out and make things weirder."

"My wish is but to serve you, my lady," he said softly, and I nuzzled his bare chest.

"You're wearing my ring," I said, and he looked away from me, a sorrow on his face that neither of us could do anything about.

"It's *truly* the least I could do," he said, and I could taste the bitterness falling from his lips so I kissed them and made them sweet. He came up for air laughing a little, and nuzzled my neck until I gasped. "We did it, you know," he murmured. "Our people are safe—from Hollow Man, at least, and maybe from like dangers."

"Don't we have to test that or something?" I was kind of skeptical, even though I'd felt my power rippling through the hill like an EM pulse.

Suddenly Green was cold sober and all business. "Don't worry, luv. I'm sure he'll take care of the testing all by himself."

He set me carefully on the bed and finished dressing. I probably could have gone to get my clothes like a big girl then, but I got to spend so few intimate, small moments with Green, that I took advantage of this one and sat and watched him dress. The sprites had been at his hair this morning, and it shook out long and straight and lemon yellow, and he brushed it and braided it deftly.

"I could do that you know," I said mildly, and he looked over his shoulder at me and grinned.

"You're not my valet, luv," he said through half-closed eyes, and I flushed. The point was made moot in a moment when Bracken came in fully dressed himself and with an armload of clothes for me.

"Where the hell are my jeans?" I picked up the three quarters skirt and the fitted blouse and cardigan with my fingertips.

"No jeans this morning," he said briefly and I went to stand up to have this argument when my knees went out from under me and I sat down hard, looking in bemusement at the black spots in front of my eyes.

"I'll get you for this," I sighed as he picked up the clothes and dressed me like a two-year-old. We both paused for a moment to watch the contrast of his tattoo against the freckled whiteness of my thigh. "Why am I dressing in librarian chic today?"

"Think of it like Easter morning," Bracken said seriously, doing a button on the back of the shirt that I ordinarily would have just let flap in the breeze. "There's a formality to a morning like this—and your mother needs to see you look serious to the hilt. After the way you introduced this whole thing, we need to give her some legitimacy." With that he looked at Green and frowned. "Is that what you're wearing?"

Green was wearing jeans and a fisherman's sweater—I thought he looked pretty spiffy, but Bracken was wearing slacks and the sweater I'd knit him, and he looked a little more formal. "Green gave Mitch's eulogy completely naked, holding me," I reminded him. "He's fine as he is."

Bracken whuffed a little in laughter, and then, as I stood up and started walking out to the hallway he swung me up in his arms against my protest.

"If Green could eulogize Mitch holding you, I can greet our mothers holding you," he said with dignity while carrying me into the front room, stepping over what looked like a zoo full of animals on the way to the breakfast. Pumas and giant housecats and a couple of wolves (very rare, those), some really large rabbits and about thirty different breeds of dog all snoozed or nuzzled in twos. A familiar tawny cat stood up on her hind legs and put her two paws on my chest so she could lick my face.

"Good night, puss?" I asked, stroking Renny's ears gently, and a purr that probably rumbled the floorboards started from her chest. A large, dark brown cat with slightly crossed blue eyes stood up on his hind legs and whuffed shyly at me, so I scratched the sweet spot between his eyes. Max purred too, and the two of them hopped down and crossed the room, curling up into a satisfied pile of happy cat and licking each other's necks and backs and ears with broad, pink

tongues. Fleetingly, I wondered what the living room had looked like last night as I'd been having my own nuclear meltdown and then I shuddered. I decided I didn't even want to know.

"They couldn't make it to the were-rooms?" I asked Bracken, flushing because my mom was standing in a corner of the kitchen by the refrigerator, looking really freaked out about the animals. Apparently she'd been too freaked out by whatever Chloe had told her to notice them on the way in, and now all of her freaking out was happening in front of all of these rather predatory beings. It was a good thing most of them were in a sex-coma, because I saw a few of them sniffing the air in a lazy, "I can wait for this mouse to run across my muzzle before I eat it," kind of way.

"Mom, calm down." I was trying for reassuring and ending up with exasperated. "Nobody's going to eat you—especially with the spread on the table." Wow—I was really impressed. There were croissants and cheesecakes and pastries of a thousand types, as well as crackers and hummus and cheeses and every fruit known to man from canned grapefruit to mango to kiwi—everything but peaches. In fact, there was pretty much every sort of breakfast food I could possibly imagine—except meat. I smiled brilliantly at Bracken's mother who was fluttering about me, looking anxious. "It's awesome," I said sincerely. "I have no idea where you found the time. Thank you so much for preparing this."

Blissa hummed and glowed incandescently with pride, and Bracken nuzzled my ear, letting me know he was pleased. I made to move out of his arms, and he clenched me even tighter. I sighed, and looked out at the living room. The were-animals were looking hopefully at the pastries, and some of the elves had woken up and were wandering in, and I looked at Green for help because this was a social thing which meant I was lost.

"Come eat, everybody," he said in a carrying voice, then he looked at Blissa to confirm something. "And I understand there's another breakfast in the were...uhm..." He looked at my mom and for the first time seemed a little disconcerted, then he sighed bravely and carried on. "The were's common room has a breakfast with," he shuddered, "more protein."

There was a happy sound of animals whuffling and rising to their feet, and suddenly the zoo began to migrate downstairs. Nicky had emerged from the hall just as Green made his announcement, and I don't know what he saw in my face

but he made a 'one minute' sort of gesture and trotted back down the hall. Bracken's mother handed me a plate full of what looked like cream puffs made of bran-wheat before Brack set me on one of the stools near the counter that semi-divided the kitchen from the living room. I waved my mom to come sit across from me, and Green and Bracken made themselves comfortable around me, leaving a stool for Nicky, and a couple of places at the table. I looked around for Arturo, but he wasn't in the room, and I wondered where he was.

"Come eat, mom," I said through a full mouth. "It's good stuff."

"It wasn't here when I got here," Mom said dazedly. "I wasn't in the room more than a three minutes, where did the food come from?"

I shrugged and smiled and offered one of those bran pastries to her. "Bracken's mom made these," I said, hoping it was true. "Try one, they're awesome."

"What about Chloe?" she asked, and I looked up to see Grace's daughter, back to the door, eyeing me and the men around me with stark, unfriendly eyes.

"Chloe isn't welcome at our table," Green said evenly, and looked up from the sidhe he had been greeting to pin the woman against the door with one of the coldest looks I'd ever seen him give. "Are you, Chloe?"

"Like I'd eat with you people," she spat, and I looked at Green, pained.

"The boys will be out in a moment," I murmured, because I didn't want them to see us having this discussion. "I think that's where Arturo went."

Green looked far away for a moment, and then returned with a snap. "They went to the were-table," he said, his mouth quirking up. "They wanted to see the were's turning."

I remembered that day with Eric and Renny and was faintly alarmed. "I hope they have..."

"Robes," he nodded, and I felt reassured. The sidhe children, I was sure, were used to all states of dress and undress, but not these human children—I didn't want to scar them for life with something they wouldn't understand. "Arturo said he set up for it this morning after we walked."

"Okay, well then in that case..." And I glared at Chloe.

"In that case," Green said, his voice hard, "Chloe, you're not only not welcome at my table, you're not welcome in my home. You can go outside and stay there until your mother wakes up and you can say goodbye." Chloe's mouth opened, and Green cut her off. "We'd hoped you could be a part of us, of our family—but that's three times now you've done something spiteful and petty to members of my family, and twice your malice has put my beloved in danger. You don't get a third chance."

"Bringing me here was dangerous?" my mom asked, and I turned to her sharply.

"Don't interrupt Green," I hissed, and turned back to him.

"You need to go outside," he continued, "and for the next few hours you need to know this: You won't remember your time here, but your children will. Your children will be invited back, and you will be powerless to say no. Your children will know their grandmother, and her people, and you will believe that she is dead, as you have always believed, but this time, you won't dream of her."

Chloe gasped, and for the first time since she'd fainted in Grace's store, looked truly frightened. "You can't do that to me!" she protested, but Green was relentless, and I was behind him.

"We have to, Chloe," he said, and it was the only gentleness he'd shown her this morning, and it wasn't much. "If your mother visits you in your dreams, you may start to remember—and we need you to forget. You brought someone here who didn't remember the way. The last stranger we let come here was Officer Max—and he's one of us now. Cory knew her way since her first night here—but she's truly special, we couldn't make her forget if we tried. We are powerful, but we can't fight against the might of God's world, Chloe. Our best weapon is the fact that nobody believes we exist, and you've taken it upon yourself to strip us of that by simply being petty and foolish. You are too old to be petty and foolish. You need to grow up, but you are too dangerous to be allowed to grow up here. So go outside, so that we may eat, and sit and think upon what you've lost. And don't think of leaving, or doing anything else malicious, because your car won't start and you've seen for yourself that it's a hell of a walk to any where but here. When your mother wakes up you may say your goodbyes—I'd think about making them count, because they're the last things you'll get to say to her. Twenty years ago, your mother was dying of cancer, and she took the only way open to her to watch you grow up. Today,

think of it as though you are dying of ignorance, and you had the only cure and threw it away. When your mother says goodbye to you tonight, it will be like you're the one who died, and left her to continue on with her life—with your children.”

Chloe was in tears now, and I almost felt sorry for her, but I looked at my mom who was dazed and upset and who would probably need her mind rolled to cope with half of what she'd seen today and I thought of Grace and of the heartbreak this was going to cause her and my pity melted like frost on coffee. She'd had her chances, and I of all people knew that you only get so many. One night I'd stopped just looking up and had taken what the Goddess gave me, and it was almost too late. Chloe had never even looked up.

Wordlessly, moving stiffly because I think Green was compelling her against her will, Chloe tucked her hand behind her, opened the door, and stepped outside. We resumed eating, and my mom stepped forward on shaky legs and sat silently down at the table.

Various members of the household came up one at a time to whisper in Green's ear and smile shyly at me. I'd grin back because I was pretty sure they were telling him that they had felt it—that the combination of sex and power and protection had rolled through the hill and through their skins and we had made our people safe. The people coming up to us were almost all higher elves or sidhe, with the occasional were-creature dressed hastily in jeans or robes or, in the case of Renny, in one of Max's shirts and a pair of white cotton panties. Max had returned and managed a pair of jeans, unbuttoned, and a white T-shirt, torn. I raised my eyebrows at the ripped neck as he came by and kissed my cheek, and he flushed so hotly I could see sweat prints form on his china plate. I looked around and noticed that most of the lower fey—the ones who looked the least human, had tactfully stayed away, and I doubly cursed Chloe. This was our time—the hill's time to honor us, to say thank you, and they couldn't, because they were afraid of the humans in our midst. We were having a wedding for my parents—we should have at least been allowed to have this breakfast for the hill.

I sighed, and tried to shake it off, but it was hard with my mother sitting right next to me, eating stolidly through some of the best pastries a human had ever tasted. I cleared my plate, and was looking fitfully at the spread on the table when Nicky showed back up, his arms loaded with plates of ham, sausage, and scrambled eggs with cheese.

"Have I mentioned I love you?" I said with no qualifications whatsoever. Nicky grinned and started dumping protein on my plate like I hadn't eaten for a week. In spite of the stacks of pastries I'd just eaten, my stomach was starting to agree with him. Max and Renny came up with hopeful eyes and Nicky and I made a plate for them. I stuck my tongue out at Renny as she snatched a piece of bacon off my plate after I'd already given her a stack, and Max mumbled thank you, and then they found a corner of their own to sit and eat. I realized that the only reason they had stayed up here with the fey was for me—they were my special friends, and I was touched. For one thing I bet the were breakfast was a lot more lively than the dignified sidhe.

Another sidhe came to talk to Green, and I took one look at that so-purple-it's-black skin and said "Twilight?" Twilight turned and smiled at me, silver tears tracking their way down his face.

"It was good, Twilight?" I asked gently, and in response he took both my hands in his and kissed my forehead.

"It was lovely, little goddess," he choked out, and I beamed back at him. He was so gorgeous now, so lovely and whole and unscarred. Green and I had done that, and I was so proud of his health and wholeness that I could cry. "I've never had such a ritual, such pleasure and love. I couldn't have made that on my own little hill in a thousand years."

I flushed. "It was all of us, Twilight." Goddess, I hoped Mom didn't figure out what any of this meant. "It took all of us. Not just me."

Twilight kissed my forehead again, and walked away with his plate, and I smiled at Green using all my teeth, then started to dig in to breakfast—phase two.

"Corinne Carol-Anne!" my mother admonished, "If you keep eating like that they won't be able to fit you through the door." I'm not sure if it was the only thing she felt like she could control, or the only way she could express her disapproval in the face of all this glowing approval aimed at me from other people, but it did the trick.

I looked woefully at the half of a sausage between my fingers, and swallowed what was in my mouth with a thump.

"Green..." Bracken growled at my side, and I looked at him in surprise.

Green nodded, as though this were something they'd discussed before and turned to my mother. "Ellen," he said gently, "I would hate to separate another mother and daughter this morning for the sake of the people on my hill."

My mother looked at him in surprise, but she'd seen him order Chloe out of the room, and she may not have understood all that had gone on between them but she certainly understood the implied threat. She looked at me helplessly, and I looked back with even eyes. No one contradicted Green in his own hill, least of all me.

Mom looked down then, and wiped her mouth with a napkin, then looked up at me with a lost expression before nodding. "I'm sorry sweetheart," she said, looking embarrassed. "You're looking really good right now—I'm not sure if I told you that."

It was a start. "Thanks, Mom," I said, and finished my well-earned breakfast.

We finished breakfast quietly, making small comments to each other mostly to watch the other person smile. There was understated touching. Nicky and I were perpetually bumping hands, Green took every opportunity to nuzzle my hair, and Bracken's hand never left my knee. All in all, I know my mother felt left out, but I couldn't help that. Finally, I found a way to involve her, and asked Bracken what I was going to be wearing for our wedding, and then he was off and rolling and my mother was hauling ass behind him, picking up the slack. I was relieved. She may not have understood whom I was marrying, or what she'd interrupted this morning, but she knew I was wearing an off-white dress with a crown of wild-flowers and a bouquet of red, thorn-less roses and that she could send invitations to Aunt Jeanie (dad's sister) so Uncle Dan could send their regrets because he never left the house. "They'll probably send you salt and pepper shakers," Mom sniffed. "It's what your father and I got and they were so hideous we gave them to you to break when you were a toddler."

Excellent, I thought to myself. We'll put them in the room for the sprites and brownies and the other tiny ones of the lower fey, and they can collect magic dust and house copulating fairies. It was all good.

Finally, I'd mopped up the last crumb on my plate and was almost full, and the room started to clear out. Renny and Max came up to me, and Renny was sending impatient looks my mom's way because it was obvious that she wanted to gossip, and I looked at Green. "Green, can we find someone to take Mom

home?" I asked hopefully, and Green nodded.

"You and Bracken can go if you like. You can check on the stores and the gas stations for me too if you like."

He was up to something. "But Green...that whole thing with Chloe...it's almost three in the afternoon—we won't be back until way after dark."

He nodded evenly. "Yes, luv, I'm aware of that."

I frowned. "You shouldn't have to do that alone," I said tentatively. "I mean..." I looked at mom, still not sure how much she'd seen in spite of the fact that nobody had worn glamour today. After watching Chloe's willful blindness, I was becoming convinced that people believed whatever they wanted to, in spite of the weight of evidence to the contrary. "I mean...Grace's people...and I...we sort of have...a rapport." Did that sound as lame to Green as it did to me? But how much worse would *I'm queen of the vampires* sound to my mom? I looked at Green and the sly glimmer in his eyes, and realized he knew exactly why it would be impossible for me to win this argument.

"You can't shelter me forever," I said obstinately, and he conceded that with a nod.

"But you shouldn't have to be a part of this." He took my hand. "Please, beloved—I'm not trying to make you look weak...but..."

I shook my head. "I was the one who told Grace," I said after a moment. "I should see this through."

He sighed and touched my cheek fondly. "You are too grown-up for your own good," he said at last, and I grinned because against all odds I'd won.

"Canyagimmehallelujia," I returned suggestively, and that made him laugh fully, open mouth, open heart, happy eyes.

"In that case," he said after a moment of goodness, "We'll have someone else take your mum home, yes?" His voice shifted in that moment, his British accent growing deeper, and I wondered what he was thinking about to make that happen. He sounded very transplanted during everyday things, but depending on what or when he was thinking about, the accent became more pronounced—and often shifted regions. He looked at my mom politely, "Is that all right with you, Mrs. Kirkpatrick?"

Mom nodded, looking distracted from a deep conversation with Bracken about Renny as a bridesmaid and Grace as a matron of honor (I hadn't been aware I'd have such things...wasn't that a little bit of overkill?) and the fact that the wedding would have to be just after sunset if we wanted that to happen, especially because Marcus wanted to stand up as well. I didn't know he'd even expressed an interest—or that Bracken got up so much after I'd fallen asleep.

"I'll take her, Green," Brack said cheerfully, and I looked at him in surprise. He winked at me, and I wondered if he was going to pull a whammy on her so she forgot everything she'd seen today. A part of me thought that was a great idea, and a part of me was sort of depressed because I'd been very proud of my stand for adulthood this morning. Bracken excused himself for a second from his conversation with Mom and murmured, "I'll sound her out, beloved. Green and the vamps aren't the only ones who can do a mindwipe, she's feeling comfortable with me right now. I think she can handle it—but I think she'd like to talk to one of us alone, too."

My face must have been blank with surprise, because I thought he really didn't like Mom at all, and then he reinstated some of my faith in my ability to read a situation by saying, "And this way, she can't hurt you anymore."

I smiled, suddenly feeling a little watery, and kissed him then, fully on the mouth, welcoming his surprised response. And that quickly, I was wet and ready all over again, and nearly devouring his face there at the luncheon table. He pulled away with difficulty, and I realized we were both flushed and panting and Green had his arm around my middle and had placed a trembling kiss into my hair. I swallowed and dredged up a smile for my mom over his shoulder, so muddled from the kiss I couldn't even summon an apology.

After that, it was a matter of goodbyes and that gentle disconnecting guests do at the end of the party, except it was my mom saying goodbye, and the party hadn't been planned, but she was so bewildered by, well, everything, that she couldn't think of a thing to say to me—not, "I didn't raise you to be a nympho sex-gluttled ho-bag", not "Are you sure this is how you wanted to live your life?" and not even a "What am I going to tell your father?". She was just subdued—ruminative, thinking quietly about everything. Either that or catatonic, and I kissed Bracken goodbye hoping their conversation went well. Nicky volunteered to go with him, and I warned them both to stay out of trouble.

Bracken turned to me and grinned as he walked out the door. "After last

night, beloved, maybe trouble should stay out of our business today, you think?"

I smiled tightly and shook my head. "Can somebody else go with them?" I asked plaintively. He had no idea how raw the image of him bleeding out while floating a good six feet over Lake Camp Far West still was in my mind. To my surprise, Mario and La Mark walked in the door at just that moment, and hearing my request, did a one-eighty out the door following Bracken. Honor guard indeed, I thought with some bemusement, and taking their job seriously. I called a grateful 'thank you' after them and turned to Green who was finishing up his milk as he sat.

"That was really odd and hectic," I said with a smile, and his answering grin was lazy and incredibly self-satisfied.

"And now we're alone," he responded, ignoring the room full of weres and sidhe who were still filling in the corners from that awesome breakfast. One look into his lowering eyes, and suddenly I couldn't see them either.

I raised my eyebrows. "Whatever will we do?"

Oh yeah. We found something to occupy the time.

BRACKEN

Unexpected Snags

Mrs. Kirkpatrick didn't look nearly as comfortable sitting next to me in the car as she had sitting across the counter at breakfast, but I suppose that the presence of the Avians in the back had something to do with that.

She cast them nervous glances while they immersed themselves in quiet conversation—I gathered from what they were saying that even from their separate hill, they had felt our safety spell, although the distance had dulled the sexual intensity that had made our hill so happy. As I swung Cory's new red SUV (Green had bought it sight unseen) around the broad curves of Foresthill road and passed Scary Tree, La Mark piped up from the back seat.

"Hey—is it me, or has Scary Tree gotten darker and grown since this winter." I didn't need to even look at it to tell him yes, it had. I'm not sure what kind of tree Scary Tree had been when it was alive, although my mother could

tell me, but now that it was dead it stood like a hulking, silver-black skeleton against the green/blonde of the grasses, with the mind-boggling immensity of the canyon beyond it. When I was young and Green had told me that Scary Tree was a measuring stick of evil I asked him, then, why it wasn't on our hill. He'd looked at me, with a half smile on his face, as though pleased that I thought everything of importance should be on the hill, and then he'd answered, "Because this tree is older than the hill by many years. In fact, I chose the location of the hill to be counter to the tree—so I know the state of the rest of the world as it relates to my home."

I looked at the tree in the rearview mirror as it got smaller but no less stark in relief. "Yeah," I said thoughtfully. "Either the hill has just become heaven on earth, or there is something exceptionally black and rotten in this area at large."

There was a glum silence then, and the SUV continued its soar through the cloven shelves of rock and short meadow that hugged the mountain while the canyon yawed beyond. By the time we came to the vast, green railed two-lane bridge that spanned the canyon before Auburn, I pulled up the most articulate version of myself and strove to make peace.

"She's not fat," I said loudly into the silence, and Cory's mother jumped with a little squeak.

"I beg your pardon?"

"You keep telling her not to eat. She's not fat." Cory would be in hysterics by now, I thought grimly. My tact had the character of a runaway garbage scow.

Mrs. Kirkpatrick blinked a little, an expression that let me see, perhaps for the first time, the similarity between mother and daughter. Her father gave Cory the coloring—the reddish hair and shadowed greenish eyes—but Ellen gave her the bone structure and, somewhere under the weariness and the judgment and the worry, the same sense of soft wonder that Cory once shielded with black lipstick. It was probably that quality that had sustained her quiet acceptance back at Green's, but as the SUV started the climb through carved naked granite walls to Auburn, her back had become stiffer and angrier with disapproval.

"Well she's not a supermodel," she said sharply, and the three men in back gasped.

"Bracken...man...you can't let her..." La Mark was the most upset—

perhaps because he was the youngest, and couldn't see the frightened parent in the aggressive critic.

"We think she's lovely," I said, trying hard to keep my voice even. "And she's ours now."

"Well yes, she is, isn't she? She's everybody's. For all I know every man in your apartment complex is screwing my daughter, and you think that telling me she's pretty is going to make that all right." As an appalled silence blanketed the car, I had a queasy moment to reflect that here was another thing mother and daughter had in common—except Cory usually managed to jump to the right conclusions before she confronted a problem head on.

"I'm a gay virgin, ma'am," La Mark snapped from the back seat, "So I'm not screwing your daughter but that doesn't mean that you're not pissing me off."

Mario snarked so hard it sounded like he was swallowing his tongue. "I was widowed this winter," he said softly, when he could breathe again. "So I'm not in that club either. You need to see your daughter the way we see her to understand how she's loved right now."

"What's to see?" Her voice rose in exasperation. "I know what we are, son. Our family is one step above white trash—don't think I don't know that." Her voice trembled for a moment. "Cory never played wedding when she was a kid — no, my daughter used to sit in her room and play queen. She'd have all her stuffed animals and her dolls all set up, and she'd wait on them and order their lives about and tell them how to fix their problems—she'd use her headboard as a throne, and put a cut-up butter tub on her head and use her grandma's quilt as a robe—it was real cute, you all would have laughed your asses off. And I had to go in one day and tell her that she wasn't ever going to be queen of anything, and she had better get used to the fact that if she was lucky, she'd get to cut hair or be a dental assistant or something that paid okay and didn't make her old before her time. She cried for a week, but dammit, when she was done sniveling she was ready for the real world. She was doing good, too—I was starting to believe she just might make it through school before you people came around and started screwing around with her. It just makes me sick—she needed a boyfriend so bad she couldn't even see it, and you all played right into that. She's only a kid—how dare you fool around with her head like that?"

My stomach clenched, and Nicky and I met stark eyes in the rearview mirror. The car began the final climb through the canyon while we groped for a

way to change the vision of the woman who had damned near crippled our beloved queen out of love.

"We will never leave her," I said nakedly, after struggling for breath and groping for words like a drowning man flailing for log. "We will always love her—our lives depend on it. And you may not understand who she is, or who we are, but that's because you're not looking with the right eyes, and you need to find them or you will never know her at all. She is our everything. Not just those of us who love her like me and Green and Nicky. La Mark and Mario follow her to school everyday just to keep her safe. Max may have given up his humanity for Renny, but he gave up his career and his family to be a part of Cory's life. She wasn't lying, or being bitter this morning Mrs. Kirkpatrick. She *is* that special. I just wish I was her right now, because I don't have the words to show you how."

The silence that fell then was total, so all consuming that it lasted through Auburn and down the hill until I got off at the Penryn exit and turned left, then left again and a right, until I found the large, raw, undeveloped piece of land on Val Verde that Cory had grown up on. We rumbled up the gravel drive, the area already dry enough to start throwing off dust, and pulled to a quiet stop, and I made a decision and turned to Cory's mother.

"Your daughter is painfully honest," I said, catching her gray eyed gaze and making sure she was tracking my eyes. "I expect you to be as well. You can either forget this morning and come to this wedding blind, seeing what you want to see and being completely in the dark..." I nodded once to make sure she understood, "Or you can remember this morning and try to come to grips with the idea that your daughter's future not only involves graduating from college and working for Green but also includes a wedding ceremony between the four of us. It's up to you, but you need to decide now, because if we ever have a conversation like this again, I won't ask, I'll simply take it all away." The one thing holding me back was the desire to honor Green. "The only memories you'll have of your only daughter from here on out will be the ones we want you to have, and that includes your husband as well. So which do you want it to be? The lie that's pleasant for you or the truth that's glorious for Cory?"

She swallowed painfully, and I could see for the first time an absolute belief in her that I could do this, that I could play with her memories like a teenager edits a comic book, and she was suddenly grasping the enormity of what she would lose if she let go of what she knew for what she wanted to

believe.

She breathed in slowly and let it out, and sighed, a tiny smile quirking at her lips. One more thing, I thought with a wrench in my heart, to add to the list of qualities she had given her daughter. "She looked awfully happy today at brunch, didn't she?" Ellen said wistfully, and I nodded.

"She looked beautiful," I agreed.

"She really looked like a queen." She was begging me for confirmation. I gave it to her.

"We'd give our lives for her," I told her truthfully, and she nodded shakily.

"I'll keep my brains in my head, thank you very much," she said decisively, and then opened the car door. "Let me know what she wants for a wedding present—I was going to make a quilt, but if you wanted something else..."

"She'd love that," Nicky said from behind me, and I nodded. "She would."

And then, with a birdlike little nod of her head that she *hadn't* given to Cory but kept all to herself, she shut the door with a *chunk* and walked across the yard, giving her husband a kiss as he paused from pushing the lawnmower over the lush grass of the season. He said something to her as I went to back out, and then looked at us, raising his hand in a puzzled farewell as we finished backing and threw the car into drive.

It was so quiet as I retraced our steps towards home that I could almost hear the churning in everybody's stomach.

"Let's make a deal," Nicky said tightly, about midway up the hill to Auburn.

"We unload that conversation onto Green and then try to forget it ever happened?" Mario asked and answered, and the rest of us nodded.

"I'm in," La Mark said on a puffed breath, and everybody looked at me. I kept trying to say something, anything, but I had this thing in my throat that would hardly let me breathe. I could see her, tiny and plump, being regal and gracious and happy, telling a story: *Listen here my people, once upon a time there was a princess who believed in herself, and she could do anything, and*

then a well meaning queen convinced her that her entire fate was a dark accident. Now she can still do anything, but she will never believe in herself the way she did when she was tiny and plump and wore a quilt as a chaperone and a butter tub as a crown.

"I'll never forget that," I said at last, aware that they were still looking at me, waiting to see what Cory's *due'alle* would do with an understanding he had never wanted. "I'm all for telling Green...and for never mentioning it to her again." I swallowed. "But I'll never forget it." *Never.*

And, silly us, we thought that was the worst thing that would happen to us this day.

La Mark and Mario hadn't been fed like Nicky and I, so we stopped for lunch in old town Auburn, and by the time we got to the top of the hill and off the freeway it was nearly seven o'clock. After the freeway overpass and right before the canyon to Foresthill Road is a McDonalds with a vast parking lot for busses headed to Reno, and that was where the police cars were gathered, cherry top lights flashing urgently. In the center of the circled cop cars was Chloe's oversized champagne colored truck. Chloe was talking to an officer, her white face chafed with tears, her shoulders trembling and her head shaking in violent denial. The boys were nowhere to be seen.

CORY

Unraveling

Green and I couldn't make love *all* afternoon, and we'd slept in plenty. About an hour after Brack took Mom home we left Green's room with hair all wet from the shower, and he went left to the front room to talk to his people and I went right to Renny's room to see if Max was still there or if we could talk.

Renny answered a soft 'come in' when I knocked, and I was surprised to see that Max was still in her room, but he was face down on her dainty, queen-sized bed, fast asleep on the pale yellow comforter. I looked around the room, noting that the bare wooden walls had been stained a faded, sage green with stunning bursts of beige and tawny brown.

"When did that happen?" I asked curiously. She had two chairs like I did, but hers were the kind with plump middles and wood scrolled legs and edgings,

and they were done in an antique white—which was good, because it contrasted nicely with the long, tawny cat hairs that covered the fabric. Renny was sitting in one of them, knitting.

"Last night," she answered calmly, then she looked at me and smiled, the kind of soft smile I knew I must get sometimes when I thought of my beloveds. "Thanks."

"My pleasure," I replied, raising my eyebrows suggestively, and she looked at me sideways.

"My God, I certainly hope so." And we both laughed a little.

"So..." And I was only kidding, "Do I get to be a bridesmaid?"

"No," she responded seriously, and I blinked back at her, surprised and not a little hurt. "We're going to have a justice of the peace thing for his parents, and a little thing here that Green will officiate."

"And I don't get to stand up with you?" Maybe I should have said 'congratulations' first, but I was now *really* shocked, because this was a lot more planned out than I had anticipated, and I didn't get to be a bridesmaid.

Renny rolled her eyes and switched her needles. "Jeez, Cory—you totally rank me...it wouldn't fit your station at all."

And now I gaped at her, grasping for words in the worst way. "Renny...we went to high school together...we read the same books for sweet Goddess' sake."

"Yes, we did." And now her eyes left her knitting and concentrated totally on me. "And it would be like Queen Elizabeth waiting on Anne Boleyn..."

"Anne Boleyn was her mother and died when Liz was a kid..."

"Yeah, but she was a lady in waiting first, and it would be a total reversal of rank, okay? Queen Elizabeth doesn't wait on anybody. You don't either."

"But Renny..." I blinked tears now, stung and totally derailed at the track this conversation had taken. "Renny, you're the best girlfriend I've had since middle school..."

Renny smiled sweetly at me, put her knitting down and put her hands on mine and squeezed. "And you're the best friend I've ever had too. But...but even

when you were friends with Davy, it was more like you were a secret agent trying to be regular people. You didn't ask to be Queen of the Vampires, you certainly didn't ask to be High Faerie Queen of Northern California...but as silly as those titles are, that's exactly what you've become. And I'd die before I dishonored you, even if you don't see it that way. You'll be there next to Green as he officiates, and I'll steal something from your closet for the Justice of the Peace thing, and you can be a witness, and don't worry—no one else is standing up with me since you can't, not even Max's bitchy sister who thinks it's her God-given right. But Lady Cory of my hill doesn't wait on anybody, not even her best friend, and I'll make sure you remember that, because we've put our lives and our safety and even our honor in your hands.”

I'd roomed with Renny—she'd gone an entire week without ever saying that much, and now what she did have to say hurt me like nothing I'd expected.

"What do you want for a wedding present?" I asked thickly, when I was pretty sure I could speak.

She smiled, her best cat smile, and picked up her knitting again. "I'll think of something," she murmured, and I shook my head.

"So, do you think Max likes being a cat?" He'd seemed like a natural this morning.

"I hope so," she said calmly, "Because I plan to boink him silly as a cat, and I want him to enjoy it.”

My eyes got wide, and I had an inappropriate girl-friend question to ask. "So...is cat sex better than people sex?" And at that moment, Green opened the door and bobbed his head towards the front room so I never found out.

"The vampires are up," he said quietly. "It's time.”

I stood up and grimaced at Renny and she nodded her head, like a bow, as I turned to leave.

"What is it, luv?" Green asked, as I seized his hand and started off down the corridor.

"Who wants to be a bridesmaid anyway?" I sniffed, and he stopped right there in the hall, knowing half the hill was outside in the front yard waiting for us.

"You did," he said softly, "But your friends won't let you wait on them."

"It's a dumb rule," I pouted childishly, and then I ran into mine and Bracken's room to get something because I didn't want to hear his answer to that. He waited for me, and together we moved outside towards the waiting court.

The front door opens out onto a landing that overlooks the gardens, with a flight of stairs to the front lawn. We opened the door, and looked out on the entire kiss of vampires and all of the sidhe. The weres, apparently, had decided to sit this one out, but that didn't stop Gavin and Graeme from being thrilled to be getting vampire rides from Ellis, Marcus, a subdued Kyle, and any other vampire willing to heft them ten feet into the air for a moment or two and then set them down. Ellis and Graeme were eye level with the landing about a second after we opened the door, and Graeme gave us a cheery wave.

"Are you coming to say goodbye, Cory?" he asked breathlessly. "Grandma says we can come back in the summertimes and stay for a whole month! We're going to call it Camp Green and we'll get a written invitation and a car and driver and everything. Ooop!" Because Ellis took that moment to roll his eyes cheerfully and drop quickly down, just to hear the delighted squeal that came with the maneuver.

"Yes," I called down to him as I pattered down the stairs with Green at my heels. "Yes, I came to say goodbye to you guys, and yes, we're all glad you get to come in the summer." That last sound brought a strangled sniff from Chloe and I looked at her coldly as I drew near. "Don't worry, Chloe. You'll think it's a free summer camp, and be thrilled to send them off."

"How can you do this?" she asked lowly, watching miserably as her children played as naturally in our world as they probably did at the local park at home.

"Since you may have forced us to do the same thing to my own mother, Chloe, I'd think you'd have figured it out. Green and I...we'd give about anything to keep our people safe. Your mother understands this...I think she loves us for it. Your memory is such a small price to pay, in the long run."

"What about my sister..."

"What about her? Have you told Regina what you've found here?"

Chloe's muttered "No" didn't surprise me—Grace told me that, from what

she'd gathered when visiting the women in their dreams, Regina and Chloe hadn't maintained much contact. "Regina's a sweet girl," she'd said proudly, "and still very idealistic—she teaches children and hopes to change the world. Chloe raises her children, and hopes the world will change for her."

"So if you haven't told her, then there's no reason for your mom not to check in on her now and then," I said reasonably. "And she'll say hi to the boys, of course."

"How can you take them away from me!" Chloe almost wailed, and I looked at her in surprise.

"I can't," I told her, blinking. "I can only give them the opportunity to know your mother. You've already rejected the chance—there's no reason they have to, right?"

With that, Grace tapped me on the shoulder, her broad, freckled features looking strained in the fading twilight, and I gave her a twisted look of my own. "I'm sorry, Grace," I murmured, and she nodded.

"Do you trust me to do it, Lady Cory?" she asked, and Chloe's gasp ripped us both a little. I cringed.

"Of course I trust you!" I did. Implicitly. "But you've been hurt enough already. I told you that Green will do it. It was our decision, we'll take care of it."

Grace nodded once, and a crimson tear sneaked out, matting her long, cinnamon colored lashes and then smearing across the side of her face when she dashed it away.

"Signal Green when you're ready," I said roughly moving aside and squeezing her shoulder.

Grace nodded and turned a bleak face to her daughter, looking more vampiric than I'd ever seen her look, more vampiric even than the night we'd claimed Kyle for our own.

Thinking of Kyle I left the two of them to their goodbyes, whatever they may entail and I went to where the boys were getting vampire rides. He was standing, waiting his turn, looking like he was barely holding himself together. The men and I hadn't seen him since the night of Davy's funeral, but then, we'd had other things on our minds.

"You look like hell," I said quietly, smiling and waving at Gavin who was looking fierce and determined not to be afraid of the ten foot gap between his feet and the earth. Kyle's pale face was corpse-white and gaunt—it was almost his feeding face, standing there on the lawn and playing with children—and his shoulders wobbled dejectedly towards the ground.

"That's funny, 'cause I feel like shit," he said laconically, and I smiled, just a little, as he'd meant me to.

"You know...Green doesn't have to sleep with you to help heal you," I said after a moment. "And there are women here who will take some of the pain away until you can bear it...and your kiss mates will do anything they can..."

"They have been," Kyle said simply. "And I'll probably come see Green later...but..." He looked at me, and suddenly he seemed wise, when once-upon-a-time I would have said he was denser than dark matter. "It took you months, Lady Cory. I know because I asked. In fact, the general consensus is that you and Bracken and Green will never be the same."

I swallowed and then looked at him calmly. "We shouldn't ever be the same," I said roughly. "But we can go on and be happy. In fact, that's what we've been doing."

I didn't give him a time to reply because I ran to intercept Graeme before he went up again.

"Aww...Lady Cory—one more ride?" he begged, and I laughed.

"You can each do one more ride, but I have to talk to you first, okay?" They both gathered near me, and I dropped down to their level, although I was so small anyway it felt a little redundant.

"First, I've got a present for you." A little shyly, I pulled the two hats out of my pocket. I'd striped one of them blue with yellow, and the other one blue with red, and then, because I wasn't that good with color yet, I'd gone and bought patches—superman and Spiderman—and sewed them on. Graeme greedily snatched at the Spiderman hat, and Gavin took the Superman hat with quiet gratitude. They thanked me, excitedly, and put the hats on their head to show me they fit, and I was pleased, because I really did love these kids, and this way I was sure they would be able to remember us. Then I had to settle down to business.

"Okay guys...someone told you that you get to come back, right?" They nodded eagerly, and I took a deep breath. "Has anyone told you that your mom won't remember us?" And there was a stunned silence. "You're flying with vampires, higher than high...you know I'm telling the truth, right?"

They nodded solemnly, and Gavin looked almost frightened.

"Now you guys haven't done anything wrong...but your mom..." I sighed. "You guys already know that this place is *special*, right?" More solemn nods. "Well you have to love a place to keep it special. Your mom doesn't love this place...and we just can't let her come back to it, okay?"

"I'm sorry," Graeme said earnestly. "I'm sorry my mom was mean to you..." And he was crying and I felt lower than fleas on road-kill.

"No no no no no..." I gathered them in for a hug that was sweet...so sweet...their little arms clung to me and they burrowed their faces into my shoulder and I just wanted to die because this hurt them and I was a part of it. "This is not your fault, guys, and it's not altogether your mom's fault...sometimes, grown-ups...they're just not ready for a place this special, that's all. But we want you to come back, and you're going to start recognizing people, elves and fey and weres and things...just because you believe, okay? So I'm going to give you a password." They'd stopped crying and were looking at me now with avid eyes. "If you see someone you think would fit in with this hill—they might even have a tattoo..."

"Like Arturo's? And Grandma's? Like Bracken's?" They chimed in, and I nodded, relieved.

"We all have one—all of us but Green. So if you see someone with a tattoo like that, and you're afraid—either of them or of someone else, you just have to say 'We're Green's people.' Can you remember that? Just tell them that you're one of Green's people, and they'll keep you safe, because that's what Green's people do."

They nodded solemnly, and we had another hug, and then I shooed them back so they could have their last vampire ride, and turned towards Grace and Chloe just in time to see Chloe crumple to the ground and Grace help her down, scarlet tears tracking her pale face.

"Oh Grace..." Because Green and Arturo were rushing to them and

anyone could guess what had happened. Grace hadn't waited for Green after all.

Arturo gathered her to him, and I saw it then, that faint bronze light that had caught my attention this morning before my mother had walked in. Oh...oh Goddess...I touched my own neck, feeling Adrian's three marks, the ones that bound me to this hill, to the vampires, and, in domino fashion, had bound me to the three men who had shared my bed last night and even to breaking the hearts of the two little boys shrieking with excitement on the lawn. The pain, the exquisite, joyous pain of that binding was a thing I couldn't ever forget, not for a day or a minute or a heartbeat, it was the scent of my beloved on my skin and he had...

I was breathing too fast as I watched Arturo shoulder his way through the crowd, hugging Grace to him. She was touching his face and murmuring an explanation even as I watched. I wouldn't trade my life for anything, I thought painfully, loving them both. I didn't expect Arturo would either.

Swallowing hard I moved to where Green was setting Chloe behind the wheel of the truck and whispering softly into her ear. Chloe's eyes opened and her posture straightened, and she looked straight ahead, just like an expectant little doll, and waited for further instructions. We signaled the vampires then, and they flew the boys to the car and we got them all buckled and secured, and their overnight bags settled as well. Green was checking Chloe's cell phone and giving the numbers to Cocklebur, a slightly built, small-statured sidhe who was writing them down, preparing, I guess, to make sure the Redding vampires had a way to make sure we left no loose ends.

Finally, the truck grumbled out of the drive in a spatter of gravel, and the people on the front lawn began to disburse, and I walked straight into Green's arms, aware that although I had been dreading the experience like a dental check-up, the reality was so much worse than the anticipation that I might never be able to go to the dentist again.

"Will Grace be okay?" I asked urgently, and Green's mouth twisted.

"No," he said after a moment, "And yes. Either way, it's over...let's go upstairs and wait for our boys, shall we?"

Forty-five minutes later I was starting to get worried—Bracken had left a message with one of the weres that they were going to stop for dinner for La Mark and Mario, but they should have been home by now. Green and I had been

reading my lit assignment together—he had the best reading voice in the world—and I had just allowed my restlessness to launch myself off of his lap so I could go grab my flip-flops and my car keys when the phone rang.

It was Bracken, and the nightmare began.

I wasn't sure how many cars went or who all was in them. All I know is that Green, Grace, Max, Renny and I all stuffed ourselves into the Caddy as Arturo drove, and I had just enough brain power to check the rearview mirror and make sure the hearse was following us since I knew there were a lot of vampires in the air and no guarantee we would be returning to the hill before dawn. I hadn't even been able to look at Grace as we'd loaded in.

"We should have sent an escort," I said now as we spanned the bridge. It was the first thing any of us had said since we loaded into the car, and I was pretty sure I was just voicing everybody else's thoughts.

"We didn't have a choice," Arturo said harshly, and I could have kicked myself. He loved those kids—we all loved those kids—and here I was grinding salt into his flesh about my own shortsightedness.

I must have made a sound, because Green squeezed my knee reassuringly. "He's right, luv. If we'd sent an escort, she would have known she was being followed and that would have tipped her off... the mind-wipe was too soon for her to see one of us in her rearview mirror. We had no way of knowing they'd stop to use the loo before they got on the freeway."

"It was probably Graeme," I said tightly. "That kid's got a bladder the size of a pea.

Arturo made a horrible sound, between a laugh and a sob and a howl and that was the end of conversation for the next ten minutes.

We didn't pull up to the McDonald's parking lot but went instead to the Lyon's across the street, where Bracken and the others were waiting tensely outside of the SUV and pacing in panicked bursts. We unloaded and Bracken first took me into a hug that had more than panic in it, and I was too tightly sprung to wonder what. Then he looked at Max and both men nodded. Max had changed into a shirt that wasn't torn and had a leather jacket on that made me think achingly of Adrian, and he strode off into the night with Renny trotting at his side to ask his fellow cops what had happened.

I did the pee-pee dance while he was gone, unable to hug Bracken or Green or to hold Nicky's hand. I had a picture in my head, an idea, a tug, a feel, and I wanted to pin it down before I told everybody to follow it, and I wanted confirmation of what I already knew before I made an ass of myself by thinking I had a power I might not.

Max came back looking grim, and Renny was subdued and upset at his elbow.

"She stopped here so the boys could use the bathroom. They parked in the upper parking lot, went inside, bought a couple of Happy Meals, and walked back to the car. Chloe's story is that someone knocked her down and grabbed the boys—but she didn't see a car or a van or even who knocked her down. She's a little out of it, but there's not a bruise on her head, so I think they're taking her in for a tox screen. Other than that they've got nada."

We nodded tensely, and then I turned to Green, thinking hard. "Green—they're ours right? I mean, they're mine. I was the power focus, I sent it rippling through everyone's skin...they were there last night...I've marked them, in a way, right?"

Green nodded. "Yes. And you should be able to sense where they are—it's the reason I didn't lock you in your room when Bracken called."

I snorted. "As if!"

"Yes, as if!" he shot back. "Because here's the thing, Cory, and you need to remember it. Everyone else here," and he gestured to everyone in the now crowded parking lot, from the people in the Caddy to the Avians to the vampires unloading from the hearse and the SUV full of were-creatures and sidhe, "All of us, are protected from the abomination that is the Hollow Man's blood—it can't hurt us, it can't poison us or enthrall us—we're safe. That includes the boys—if he had hurt them any other way, you would know it by now," he nodded urgently. "So everyone is safe from his worst weapon, yes?"

I nodded back yes, wanting him to hurry up.

"That is, my beloved, everyone is safe except you—your only safety is if all of us," his nod took in Bracken and Nicky, "are with you. So no haring off into the wild dark yonder. No springing a trap so you can get inside of it." He gave Bracken a meaningful look and I flinched because not too long ago I'd done

just that to save Bracken's life. "We're going searching, and yes, beloved, we're following you—but you need to promise us that you'll put your safety above all else."

"Green..." I fought to stay calm, to keep my face from squinching and my voice from breaking. I fought to keep the tension of hysteria from my body because haring off into the wild dark yonder was exactly what I wanted to do. "Green, those boys are *ours*. Davy wasn't ours and I can live with that, but those boys are *ours*, and I can't live with keeping safe if..."

"The hell you can't," Grace growled behind me, and I turned to meet Grace the vampire in all her glory. Her wide, freckled face was gaunt with the change of her species. Her eyes had gone from limpid brown to whirling so redly that the blaze of them lit up the blood under her skin, and she glowed, she glowed like a demon and her mouth was all fangs and they were all extended and ready to rip me apart.

I gasped and kept myself from closing my eyes and backing up from her in shame and in fear because Green and I had done this, Green and I had put her grandchildren in danger and now they weren't letting me go get them back.

"I cut Chloe loose for you, my Lady," Grace ground out, her voice a hollow growl. "I let those boys go, knowing that there was a danger beyond our hill and I did it for you, and for Green. And I'd do it again. So don't fuck up my trust by getting killed, do you understand my Queen?"

I blinked twice and breathed in hard. "I understand," I said into the thundering silence that was filled with only our harsh breaths and heartbeats. "I understand that I'll get them back, that's what I understand," I barked, and then whirled around and opened the door to the Caddy. "They're across the overpass, down Bowman and then take Luther Road." Until I said it, I had no idea that's where the buzzing in my stomach was leading me, but I knew it was truth. After thinking of nothing *but* the boys and my fear for them for the last half an hour, this thing in my gut was more than a feeling, it was more than a pull...it was just knowledge, dropped into my brain like a slide into a projector, and I could see what they saw, recognize what they knew and my urgency was spurred on by their fear.

"NOW, people!" I snapped, and bodies were diving for cars and we were off and running. Somehow, without jostling or shuffling, Bracken and Nicky ended up in the Caddy along with Grace, Green and I.

"I meant it Cory," Grace said from the back seat, but her voice was closer to normal and that moment of crisis was over.

"Down Luther," I said again as Arturo got near it and he gave me a droll look, as panicked as I know he was.

Luther Road was often used as a shortcut between Hwy 80 and Hwy 49, and it may have had a few, home-run businesses on it, but the streets that shot off from it were purely residential. There were houses with half-acre lots, and trees in their backyards, long driveways and a variety of floor plans. It's sort of what subdivisions should be like before they became tiny houses and tinier yards. There were no streetlamps, no sidewalks, and no sculpted lawns. Here, in the dark, I could only follow a feeling and the blurry impressions I had gotten from the boys as we traveled the same space. Their impressions came from about two-hundred feet up, but I didn't share this with anybody, I only hoped they were as brave with our enemy as they had been with friends on Green's front lawn.

The impressions begin to waiver, though, when we hit the second round of turn-offs into the residential areas, and the first hit of evil filtered through the car's ventilation system. Grace and I both made gagging noises in tandem and I gestured frantically for Arturo to turn right down Matson and to pull off to the side.

"We're close," Arturo said needlessly, and I nodded, and then slammed the door open and exited the still moving vehicle to fall to my knees on the graveled road shoulder in front of a long stretch of watered crabgrass and try to get my stomach under control.

The hearse was hard on our heels, and the other SUV as well, and I noted that Kyle, Marcus, Phillip, Bryn and Ellis were in the hearse, and the SUV was full of were-creatures including Leah, Steph, Joe, and a couple of wolves I didn't recognize, as well as Cocklebur and Twilight. I grimaced as all of these definitely odd people piled out of three cars in one of the more crowded of the subdivisions, but the vampires were looking decidedly grey around the gills, so I figured maybe we could claim food poisoning if someone asked.

"Thank the Goddess," Marcus said softly, coming up to touch my shoulder in sympathy. "The smell is bad, but it's so much better than it was that night..."

He was right, I thought, nodding my head. The literal stench of abomination had faded, and after a moment I murmured, "I'll be okay." Bracken

hauled me to my feet, still breathing hard to keep my stomach under control, but much more functional than I expected to be.

I looked at him sourly. "You will never know how lucky you are," I accused, and he kissed me softly on the forehead.

"You're okay, bird dog. Now track."

I was in the process of obeying orders (autocratic bastard) when he suddenly laughed, the sound odd and jarring in the middle of all this tension.

"You brought your *knitting*?" He gestured to the quilted tapestry bag over my shoulder, the amazed smirk on his face making me want to kick him.

"I brought my *gun*, genius," I snapped back, taking satisfaction in the 'oooohhh' dawning on his handsome face. "It's in my purse inside the bag." I smirked at him and then looked at the vampires, nodding north-ish (or so I thought) up Matson some more. I could see, even from where we'd pulled up short to stop, that there was a big stretch of green with a horse-enclosure smack in the middle. There were some trees scattered around houses back from the horse area, and that area was haunted with trees and shadows and smaller, intimate buildings among big houses, private driveways and excellent hiding places for the bad guy.

"Fan out," Green said, his voice carrying, but still soft enough to stay under the radar. "Stay in clumps—no one person goes anywhere, always in twos or threes. Give a shout out, to whomever you look to, if you find anything."

And with that we set off down the sweet little suburb, Green and Bracken flanking me, and Nicky crossing the street to follow Grace and Arturo. We all moved as quietly as we could, but I told Marcus to have the vampires stay on the ground. I'd seen an aerial battle, and I'd been on the ground during one, and it seemed to me that a group on the ground had a defensive advantage versus a group in the air. I'm sure there are air force pilots out there who would disagree with me, but working with jets was a lot different from the perspective of an anti-aircraft gun and besides—hollow Man had been flying when he first snatched the boys. If he had them now, there was nothing in the spell I had cast the night before to keep them safe if he dropped them from two-hundred feet in the air.

Summer was nearing and the night was pleasant, but the neighborhood was

extremely quiet. I didn't know what to make of this—shouldn't there be joggers? Teenagers killing time? Neighbors visiting? Maybe they thought about it, took one look outside and decided 'mmnnnoooo...not tonight'. Maybe they'd been doing that for a while. Maybe the whistle from the nearby train was a lonely sound tonight, or the trees whispering overhead seemed too sinister, or the dark seemed all encompassing. We had encountered an enemy before who had existed among humans like this, and I still didn't understand how an entire block of people could just tuck their heads in their houses and tell themselves that it was all in their imaginations.

We kept walking even though the stink made it hard on the vampires. The were-animals kept shifting nervously in their shoes, and I'm sure they were hearing the same thing we were smelling, but everybody looked determined. Suddenly, the smell got worse, and without warning there was a flurry and a rustle and animal noises as every were-creature in our party just shifted, without preamble and seemingly without conscious thought. Nicky and the other Avians launched into the air away from their respective groups, heading towards us. They started flying about five feet above me and Brack and Green, and in a little more time (they had to get free of their clothes) there was a pack of wolves, pumas, dogs and a giant misplaced housecat heading toward us as well, circling me, the elves, and the vampires, facing outwards and growling into the night.

"Think he's near?" I asked gamely and Bracken and Green grabbed my hands, without any humor whatsoever. I heard a frustrated yowl and looked over across the street to where Max was rolling on his back and trying to get his oversized paw free of his cool black leather jacket. He was hissing and spitting up a storm, and I felt bad for him. "Oh—c'mon—grace, Arturo—can someone help him out?" Poor Max—he was way too new to the whole cat thing to come out and play cop.

But nobody was paying attention to me—the vampires were trying to stay upright, the were-creatures were surrounding me and letting a variety of loud scary animal sounds and the elves, including Arturo, were squinting into the night in frustration. Everyone knew he was out there, everyone knew he was close, no one could pin him down.

And then a pale shape came fluttering out of the dark, knocking the Avians aside even as they shrieked and attacked it back.

"Nicky!" I shrieked as I saw him hurtled to the ground and Green and

Bracken clutched me closer and swore because they could see the birds getting thrown about but they couldn't see the assailant. Grace and the other vampires launched themselves with moaning growls of fury, and they moved in hyperspeed, but they were too slow. They flew at the pale shape only to be knocked aside, two and three at a time, and Marcus got thrown to the ground much faster than he'd flown into the air, landing at our feet with a horrible splat, and I had a moment to be glad there were were-creatures here who could feed him so that he could heal quickly, and then I was hauling at Green's and Bracken's hands, trying to get to my gun out of my yarn bag so I could shoot this asshole out of the fucking sky.

Because the vampires and Avians were losing. Grace got thrown aside, sailing into a huge old oak tree about fifty feet away and getting tangled in the branches, and then Phillip and then Kyle, and they all came back, they all hurtled to their enemy using the Goddess' speed and their own force and momentum and I heard grunts from the Hollow Man and shrieks of pain from our own people and still they got thrown back. The Avians took over when the vampires were recovering, including Nicky who had pulled back from his first fall and hadn't even hit the ground. The Hollow Man moved too fast, with an elf's grace and a sorcerer's cunning and a vampire's speed and force and for all that he had done his fighting with other people's bodies so far, his body was more than enough to defeat us when we weren't bound into one cohesive whole.

"I need my hands!" I shouted, because the elves weren't letting go of me, and in desperation I made two fists and willed my power into them to make Green and Bracken give me some room. They let go with frustrated oaths and I ignored their dirty looks and took a step back to throw some fireballs at this fuckhead, but I couldn't because the vampires were swarming around him. They were right overhead and Kyle took a blow to the jaw that must have shredded his lips on his teeth because blood splattered on those of us below, hitting my cheek and painting Green and Bracken with crimson speckles and I swore and ordered Green to clear the sky. "Make them move!" I shouted and he did that thing, that carrying, 'I'm the leader' thing with his voice and hollered, "My people, clear the sky!"

And as a whole, every creature in the sky that wasn't ours dropped to the ground and I threw two powerballs at the Hollow Man's chest and hit him dead on.

The first ball of fire made him stutter in the air, obviously hurt, and the

second one made him shout—a sound that caused the were-animals at our feet to crouch and whine and snap—but neither burst of supernatural energy destroyed him, and I had grabbed Bracken's hand and was charging again when he dove out of the sky above us and came straight towards me.

The elves couldn't see him. I screeched and tried to grab a blurry, fast-motion arm with my own nuclear-fusion hand, but Green and Bracken could only feel the passage of the body, watch me struggle with the flesh and finally shout in frustration and anger when those arms, those clammy cold arms with flesh like giant maggots wrapped around me and ripped me off the ground. Bracken held on until my shoulder gave a wrench and I howled, and then he let go, the look of despair on his face as he fell that ten feet to the ground almost breaking my heart through the bubble-wrap of fear around it.

Oh yeah, I fought like hell. I caught that chilly flesh with my nails and pumped power into my hands and grabbed at earthworm-cold muscles and skin until Hollow Man screamed in surprise and pain and actually dropped me.

The wind blasted at my ears and the dark whirled in an airbrush of gray and I desperately remembered that I could fly on occasion and pulled enough power to form a shield between me and the earth and just when I was slowing into a controlled fall and bounce, I felt that repulsive flesh around my waist and I was jerked upwards again, this time dangling upside down over an indignant, corpse-cold back. My yarn bag slid off my dangling arm to be caught by one strap just before it fell to the ground. I watched in dejection as my leather purse—with the damned gun—jounced out of the gaping opening and spiraled to the ground with a thump I could only imagine. With a pissed-off groan, I wriggled some more until it dawned on me that he seemed to have a goal, and that if he had a goal then that was probably where he stashed the boys and hitching a ride on his nasty self was my one way of saving them.

I stopped struggling abruptly, and settled with one power-aided punch on the back that made him grunt.

"You *fuckhead!*" I bitched, punching him some more and looking down to where, separated by a big slice of dark sky, Bracken and Green were scrambling about in agitation, unable to see my captor, and losing my own form into the darkness as we blurred away from them with blinding speed. "I will never hear the fucking end of this, do you realize that? They're gonna lock me in a fucking box and not let me out until I'm ninety." I pounded his back again, with my own

small strength and a giant, cathartic 'aaaaaarrrrrrrgggggghhhhhhhh!' and then settled down for the ride.

The sewer stench of Hollow Man never really got better, but eventually, after I'd resigned myself to being in his company for a while, it got to the point where I could ignore it and wonder where we were going.

As it turned out, we weren't going all that far. As Matson continued, there were enormous amounts of green, moonlit lawn—I wasn't sure if they were rich people's lawns or golf courses, but the big-ass house by the pond at the end of the side road beneath us was definitely a one family residence. The mother-in-law cottage about two hundred feet behind it was close enough to the train tracks to shake when the damn engine went by and it was here that Hollow Man landed.

The cottage itself was sort of standard—made for one or two people and some guests, stucco walls that would probably be tan in the light but that just looked dim and pale now. The weirdest detail of the whole night was listening to the Hollow Man (maybe I'd find out his real name, now) search the pockets of his wool slacks for the keys to the entry way while I hung suspended over his shoulder. (Which was bony, by the way, and digging painfully into my ribs and abdomen.)

Once he let himself in, he didn't linger, and I had a vague impression of a living space with a really big leather couch and three or four bedrooms—any one of which could have held the boys—before I was hauled down stairs into what looked like a basement. A basement? A mother-in-law cottage with a basement? It had a pool table, a futon, a gorgeous throw rug in azure and fuchsia, and a refrigerator that was probably meant to hold beer, and steel walls that were probably thicker than my waist.

"A bomb shelter?" I asked out of sheer stinking curiosity. "You managed to find a mother-in-law cottage with a bomb shelter? Who in the hell are these people?"

"Rich and paranoid," he snapped, dumping me on the sky-blue futon. "And visiting Spain for the winter." He stepped back from me and frowned, looking past my shoulder to the undecorated wall behind me, and I got a good look at our adversary at last.

He wasn't much to look at. Short—that was my first impression. He was

shorter than Nicky and taller than me, which probably made him around five-foot-four, but I'd seen people (my old English teacher for one) who could carry that height and make it look big. This guy was not one of those people.

In life, he'd had acne—not the horrible kind that made me feel so bad for some of the guys in high school—just the irritating kind, the kind that got picked and scarred and picked some more and then left absurdly shaped scars around his cheeks. I would place a bet that about the time his acne cleared, his hair began to thin, because at death he'd had what looked suspiciously like a bland/blonde comb-over on what had probably been a twenty-five year old oily scalp. Now he was a twenty-five year old walking corpse with a baby-shit green complexion. No wonder he'd borrowed Jon Case's body, I thought with a stab of pity—I'd bet all of the bodies he'd snatched for his own use were good looking. I got so used to being around the Goddess' get that I forgot sometimes, what it was like to be human and homely and to feel, deep in your gut, that everything from your hair to your pores repelled the rest of your species as a whole.

But still, there must have been something innately attractive about this guy, right? Twilight had loved him. A member of the sidhe had chosen him, had lavished the kind of care and attention on him that I got on a daily basis, and had planned to care for him that way until he died, presumably in worse physical condition than he had been when it had all gone horribly wrong. I wondered if I'd have time to figure out what it was about him that had made him desirable, or if I was just going to have to kill him and get it over with.

"I wouldn't do it," he said in what was an admittedly handsome baritone voice. He looked at me glumly, assessing my tense, poised body and the way I was charging power like mad.

"You got a good reason why I shouldn't?" I stood up and smiled toothily, waiting for the buzzing in my chest to get big enough to force it into my hands and throttle him with it.

"Whatever you'd do big enough to kill me, would probably destroy the house, right?" he asked, leaning back on the pool table with an irritating nonchalance and I nodded, knowing where this was going but wanting to hear him say it. "You'd kill the kids, and that was the thing that got you out here, right?"

"If you've hurt them," I said pleasantly, letting my force ease up a little but keeping it in reserve in the back of my throat like tears. "There's not a power on

the planet that will save you, you know that right?"

"Your people won't do anything to hurt you..."

"They know I'd die for those kids," I broke in. I'd made that pretty clear. "What do you want them for?"

He blinked and shrugged a little. "I'm hungry," he said plaintively. "I'm hungry, all the time..."

"You're a vampire! The soul-stealing kind!" Oh, please—he couldn't be this stupid, could he? "What did you expect when you went begging the Huston vampires to turn you?"

"Well for one thing I expected a little fucking respect!" He burst out, sounding surprised. "All those other vampires...people are nice to them."

"Well I'm the Queen of the fucking Northern California vampires, shithead—if you'd wanted some respect, maybe you could have tried talking to me instead of going after my people!" I thought of poor Chris Williams. "Or any people," I finished sadly. "Did you really go to all the trouble of snatching those little kids for a meal? There are plenty of humans who'd roll over on their backs, spread their legs and beg you to take them, bleed them, and do it again—why'd you snatch *my* people?"

"They glowed like you," he said distractedly. "The boys, I mean. I thought maybe they'd be supernatural...I like supernatural blood...Humans don't...don't satisfy me..." he said, sounding surprised and sad. His pasty greenish face assumed a stiff expression of pique. "I can drain them and drain them...I drained your little friend, once I realized she wasn't you, and I was still hungry. But supernaturals...they last a while...they make me feel...alive..." His voice trailed off in a dreamy way and I wondered sickly how many of his own people he'd killed because he hadn't figured out the nature of his own existence.

"How long have you been murdering your own people?" I asked, not wanting to know but feeling I had to.

"I don't know..." he said, looking a little disconsolate. "The year I turned...let's see...that movie had just come out..." He smiled a little, and for the first time I could see just a little bit of humanity in him, a little bit of boyishness, but it still wasn't enough for me to know what *Twilight* had seen. "*Ferris Buehlers Day Off*," he remembered with joy. "I loved that movie."

"Twenty years," I said blankly. "You've been killing your own people for as long as I've been alive." For some reason that totally blew my mind. "Why! For the love of the Goddess...you had a sweet set-up in Huston—a good home, emerging powers...Twilight as a lover—why? Do you know how we tracked you down, Hollow Man? We tracked you down by *smell*...the things you've done to yourself... the things you've done...you've become an abomination to your own people...why?"

"What did you call me?" he asked, seeming to ignore everything else I'd said.

"The Hollow Man." I flopped disconsolately onto the futon, wrapping my arms around my knees. He obviously needed me for something and I wasn't going to fight him now, when he was right about not wanting to hurt the boys. I may as well make myself comfortable.

"Why would you call me that?" he asked, looking unhappily at his shiny black shoes. He'd looked everywhere but at me since he'd dropped me in this little, cold room.

"Because you un-make everything you touch," I said, blinking up at him. "You're never satisfied." He was such a non-entity, standing there with his attention wandering around the bare-steel room. I'd expected more. I'd expected a big Gothic bad guy with a Bela Lugosi accent, and I got the kid who didn't go to prom and never got over it.

"Well I never got enough!" He burst out, toeing the very pricey throw rug under the pool table. "I mean, I've got this sorry-assed power where I can move shit around, but really—what can you do with that?"

"Well, you could have fought crime," I suggested nastily, "But you chose to throw losers at me instead." The image of Chuck and Shane, their heads split open because this guy had thrown them at me like softballs rose in front of my eyes like black spots.

"It didn't get that big until I turned," he grouched. "Until I died, all it really did was break shit."

"That's because it's all you chose to do with it!" I thought longingly of the boys, and that wonderful day in the garden when just the tiniest bit of sun had peeked through the clouds, making their shield bubbles full of rainbows. "These

power things—they're really only as big as our hearts you know," I said, trying to get through.

"But I'm not really hollow..." He was still stuck on that. "I mean...I've got flesh and blood..."

"You've apparently got everybody else's flesh and blood." The terrible waste...the horrible deaths...he was so empty...was it all because he was so empty?

"Yeah—that one guy had a great body. I could have walked around as him for a long time." He narrowed his eyes and looked disgruntled. "And then your boyfriend..."

"Husband."

"Ripped his heart out. And you killed my other friends."

"You threw them at me!" My stomach heard the thud of Chuck's head as it hit the wall again and I swallowed hard.

"It's hard to get friends," he said sadly. "People don't really like me."

"Yeah, that's a shame. Do you realize that you corrupt everything you touch with your...your...need? People don't like you because once you touch them, they blow up!" An image of Ellen Beth flashed before me, her eyes rolling whitely around in her lover's corrupted blood.

"That's not my fault!" He whined. "I mean...I need to eat...they like it when I feed. It's not my fault it's not enough. And they talk to me and they agree...it's not enough. Nothing is ever enough...and we ask ourselves, what do we want that we don't have? What do we need? And we need...and we need...and then I'm all alone, needing without them...it's not my fault they leave me..."

His whine was beginning to grate on my nerves, partly because I was starting to feel for him. He really did seem lonely...maybe the corruption of the blood wasn't his fault...I shook myself and stuck to the important things. "Can you tell me again why you needed the boys? You can't infect them you know."

He nodded, still sunk in his own sense of having been wronged. "I know...you did something to them...I can't bite them...my teeth sort of bounce

off.”

"You can't bite any of us," I told him frankly, thrilled to know that what we'd done had worked. "You might as well go away.”

"I can bite you," he said, "Your skin doesn't smell the same." And then he looked up at me pleasantly and smiled, meeting my eyes for the first time. Terror settled into my stomach like a sleeping puffer fish.

His eyes were pale, pale blue, almost translucent they were so colorless, and they were empty, puzzled, devoid of anything but his own self-pity. He smiled wistfully for a moment. "I'd bet you'd taste wonderful...you're pretty powerful, aren't you? Power tastes good. The sylphs taste okay...but Twilight..." He shuddered in a really repulsive ecstasy of sensuality. "Twilight was the best...he was the closest I ever came to full.”

"That's because he loved you," I said sadly.

"Yeah." He smiled happily. "That was nice—it was nice that he loved me. But he was holding out on me—all I wanted was everything he had...how can you love someone and not want to give them everything?"

I thought of Bracken and Green, doing everything in their power to keep me safe, to keep me alive and whole and well, and of Adrian, who had died trying to do the same thing. "Sometimes everything is not yours to give," I said sincerely.

"No." He shook his head. "I never got any breaks—my mother left me..."

"She died, Hollow Man...that's not the same as leaving you.”

"She was gone...she just didn't want to stay with me, and I wasn't cute enough to adopt...Twilight loved me. He promised me the world but..." He shifted restively, shrugging off the tremendous, earth-shattering bounty that was a sidhe lover as though regretting not buying shoes. "He didn't really give it to me. If he'd given me all he had, I wouldn't have...I wouldn't have just wanted more. I think he just wanted to watch me wither and die, like my mom. He wanted to keep me mortal and dependent on him...love the poor human...I was a charity case, that was all...and his charity wasn't worth shit.”

Oh...oh Goddess...this guy was scary. I'd faced the vengeful and the power-hungry and I'd been able to get hot and angry and do my job. This

guy...this guy scared me cold, clammy cold, the chill of his smooth maggot flesh. "Let the boys go," I begged from the heart.

"I can't," he said surprised. "I can't feed off of them, but I marked them so they can't go back. They're mine," he smiled happily, "and I'll give them what no one gave me. I'll make them immortal."

I blanched, my breath suddenly whooshing out of me like I'd been hit. "Oh Goddess," I whispered. "Goddess...oh gees...Hollow Man, tell me how many times you've marked them." *The first is empathy*, I heard in my brain. It was a vampire mantra—one I hadn't heard when Adrian had marked me but that Marcus had told me since I'd come back to the hill and started blooding my people. *The second is telepathy, the third is changeability, the fourth is immortality*. Adrian had marked me twice while he was alive, his soul blowing through mine like a breeze blows through your hair. The third time had been as he'd died, and his soul had blown through me on its way to...to Green's hill, I guess, where he haunted us still. The third time he'd given me his kiss of vampires to protect, the power of blooding his people—it was the only power that I, a living, breathing human—could absorb from him. If he'd marked me a fourth time, my life would be as tied to his as Bracken's was to mine. I would have died when he did, and as much as I might have wanted to die the morning Green and I woke up to a world without him, I had plenty of reasons to live now. And the idea of this guy's polluted soul blowing through the bodies of those sweet little boys made me sick.

"How many?" I repeated. From what I understood it was hard for a vampire to do more than once in a week, but this guy...this guy took over new bodies on what was apparently a regular basis. He knew how to move his pale, starveling soul with ease...how many times had he fouled their hearts with the texture of his yearning evil?

"Only once," he nodded. "But it was sweet..." He shuddered again, and I tried to keep my dinner down. "So sweet... imagine how sweet it will be if I'm in their bodies when I move my soul through them?" He swallowed convulsively, and I noticed a thin trickle of spit tracking down his skin and thought I was going to barf on his shiny black shoes if he didn't shut up. Oh, Goddess...I had to undo that abomination...I had to find some way to wipe that taint off of their poor, helpless little souls.

"Can't you just..." I tried to keep the tears out of my voice, not that he was

noticing anybody else's unhappiness but his own. "Can't you just let them go?"

"They taste so good..." He closed those colorless eyes and breathed deeply, serene I guess in his own impending satisfaction. "They're the best break I've ever gotten."

"I bet I'd taste pretty good," I said cheerfully, hoping to distract him.

He eyed me and nodded. "Yes," he said. "But you'd taste better if I was inside you. I'll wait until you're weak and I can be inside you. That's what I've been waiting for since I've seen you at school you know. To be inside you and to taste you...you were so bright, walking through that campus. I wanted your boyfriend..."

"Husband."

"But he could destroy me...so I had to settle. You and your friends were like army searchlights. I just wanted to be a part of you...to have you..."

I stood up, ignoring the stench and moving up to him to plead, to see if I could beg some sense into his dreamy, off-center self. "You have no right to us..." Those little boys...I couldn't blow up the house or I'd kill them but if I let the house stand what would happen was worse.

"Your boyfriend..."

"Husband."

"... would carry you through the halls and the quad, and the world would part for you—you were like the goddamned queen of every-fucking-thing. I wanted that. I wanted him too—god, he was beautiful. But mostly I wanted to be carried through the world like I was the king of every-fucking-thing...and now I'll have you to taste...and I'll have the boys, bound to me, worshipping me while you suck me and kiss me and worship me. I'll have everything."

"You had everything," I whispered sadly, looking past his pathetic, lost-kid face and thinking of Twilight and his little house and the were-creatures he'd nurtured and the love that shining creature had blessed this pitiful *thing* with. "You had everything, Hollow Man, and you lost it, and one way or another, you are not going to survive this night."

He backhanded me then, his vampire muscles and hyper-speed motion

throwing my body against the futon and my head into the steel wall behind it and pain exploded in my skull and in my nose and cheekbone and the world began to fade.

"My name is Steve," he said softly, and then slammed the door as the world went black.

GREEN

Picking up

Green watched her fall and thought his heart would stall right there in his chest until he saw the shining shield she'd created to catch herself. Then she was jerked upright and pulled into the darkening night again and he wondered if he'd ever breathe again.

He was blurring, blurring towards her, but Hollow Man was in the air and flying wasn't one of his powers and they were fading, fading from his sight and then they were gone.

"BUGGERFUCK!" Bracken howled behind him, falling to his knees and beating the concrete with his fists until his skin shredded and the concrete cracked.

"Buggerfuckingcowshittingcockslurpingsonofabastardscumsluttingwhore," Bracken continued his pound into the pavement with that truly awesome show of language and Green just stared into the sky with disbelief. She was gone. He couldn't see her anymore. All they had done to keep her safe and she could just be hauled off into the dark yonder without him. Bracken was still on his knees, swearing brokenly and without thinking about it Green walked back to him and put his hand on his brother's shoulder to calm him down. They'd never find her if Bracken hurt himself in despair.

The vampires pulled themselves up from where they'd been smacked and stunned, and the were-creatures pattered over, whining softly, offering throats so their friends could heal. The three Avians touched down in front of him and Bracken and turned, checking out torn skin, bloodied limbs and bone-deep bruises as they stood.

"Goddess," Nicky swore softly, putting his own bloody hand on Bracken's shoulder and squeezing gently. "Well, at least we know he wants her alive."

"Yes," Green nodded automatically and forced himself to think. Think (she was just taken from him...) think (she was vulnerable) think (oh Goddess, he couldn't...) think (couldn't do this again...) think (oh Goddess...please please please...don't do this to him, not again...not so soon after...not when they'd nursed her back to health and she was starting to live that promise...that

fabulous promise of what she'd always been meant to be...) think...breathe...think..."Nicky, Bracken—you're bound to her magically. Can you feel her pulling at you?"

Nicky said yes, and Bracken stared at his bloodied hands dangling at his thighs and nodded. Green took another deep breath and sent a surge of healing through Bracken's shoulder and they both watched for a relieving moment as the rips in Bracken's skin and the cracks in his bones re-knit. "You know she gets upset when you hurt yourself," he said gently, and Bracken visibly pulled himself together and took Green's offered hand to stand.

"We know she's alive...and we know the boys are," Green said, and everybody nodded, seeming to take some strength from the knowledge. Renny and Max limped over to Green and thrust disconsolate heads under his hands and he stroked their heads, gaining some strength himself. "The vampires can track us to his general area by scent. The weres can protect them when the smell gets too bad. Nicky and Bracken can keep us going after that. We stay together—completely together. If he caught the boys to feed, he's been sorely disappointed, and none of us are safe."

"What are we going to do when we find him?" Grace asked, her voice edging on hysteria, and Arturo put his palm in the small of her back. "No—I'm serious—we just got our asses kicked by one guy..."

"Because Cory wasn't using her power," Green said firmly. They couldn't afford to fall apart now. "Because we were all so busy protecting her we didn't give her a chance to do her job. She's known all along how to defeat Hollow Man..."

"No," Grace said.

"And we didn't listen."

"*Mijo*, no," Arturo seconded.

"But we know now, don't we—and the three of us have a way to keep her safe as she does it, and that's what we're going to do."

Bracken made a broken sound, a terrified whimper, and Nicky looked at him with wide, hurt eyes. "We know she's alive," Green snarled in the face of their doubt. "Now it's time we believe in her the way she's always believed in us. But first we've got to find her..." He swallowed, the myriad things that could

happen between the snatching and the retrieving swarming him before he had a chance to ward them off. He swallowed again and made a defensive gesture with his hands for the purely mental pestilences of fear that were besieging him. "And we've got to find her soon. I don't know our enemy. Everything he's done so far has been beyond our comprehension...I...I don't think we *can* know him. I don't think anything in us can understand this...this moral vacancy...but we know it's got her, and the boys, and we need to get them now."

And with that he looked to the vampires, who nodded him north again, and as a whole they turned and headed that way.

They had to stop several times to tend to the wounded who didn't want to slow the group down, but eventually the limping and the whimpers and the occasional stagger brought concerned attention their way. Cocklebur had sustained a wrenched shoulder, trying to grab at Hollow Man as he'd come for Cory.

"You came closer than anybody but Bracken," Green praised softly as he healed. The slight little blue-toned sidhe blushed and bowed slightly—he hadn't been Cory's biggest fan when she came to the hill, but he loved her as much as everybody else, now. Twilight put his arm around Cocklebur's shoulders and the two of them stayed staunchly to Green's side when they resumed.

Steph and Joe were okay—but they whined at Grace's feet until she fed from them, just a little, and they knew *she* would be okay. Marcus had regenerated much of his internal injuries, but he needed to feed to supplement the healing, and Leah offered him a willing throat while Phillip helped to support his weight. Max would have done it, but as he padded up to do the offering his back leg folded and Renny trotted to him to nuzzle his neck and whine. Bracken took a look and laid a gentle hand on the new were-cat's muzzle.

"You got hamstrung in the fight," he said gently. "He was moving so fast I didn't even see—c'mon...let's have Green get a look." And with that he hefted the big animal in his arms and trotted up to the front of the group, where Green was tending to an already mending rip on Mario's arm.

"Man, I really liked those jeans," Mario was complaining, trying to keep things light—he was standing in the middle of someone's lawn, buck naked. "I can't believe I lost *everything* in trans."

Arturo gave an amused grunt and blurred away in hyperspeed, returning

with an armload of clothes. "I don't think the weres are going to need them," he said dryly, and as Green turned his attention to Max, Mario started putting on his clothes—including the leather jacket which he stroked appreciatively.

Max turned baleful eyes on him from Bracken's hold and growled, and Green fondled the dark brown ears. "He'll take good care of it, Max—it's the envy of every non-sidhe on the hill." And then he ever-so-gently ran his hands down the back of the injured leg and sent a breath of healing through the sundered tissues and ripped tendons. Max gave a whimper and a mrreowwlll and Renny almost knocked Bracken over in her attempts to reach him. After a moment he started struggling out of Bracken's arms and Bracken put him down, as good as new. Max licked his hands in appreciation, and then moved to Green and did the same.

Arturo watched all of this with raised eyebrows. "And to think—I would have killed him last summer without a second thought."

"Lucky us you didn't," Green said dryly, and they moved on.

The going was slow. The Hollow Man had occupied this neighborhood for a long time—his stink was all over the place, from the roots of the grass to the leaves on the trees to the ether above—and the vampires had to think very carefully before they chose another direction.

The were-creatures were so incensed by the sound of the wrongness that often they would whine and growl at the sound of the wind through the trees. A train came by once, off in the distance and the sound so unsettled the two werewolves that they became naked, beautiful young men in one heartbeat, furry, magnificent wolves in the next, and so on until they finally collapsed in a heap of exhausted human limbs and panting, sobbing breaths. La Mark—who had lost his shoes and his jacket in trans—limped back to them. He knew them from his time in the were's common room and he looked up to Green. "I'll take them back, leader," he said quietly. "They can't do this anymore, and I'm about done in...I'm sorry."

Green grimaced in sympathy. "Go ahead, brothers. Thanks for what you've given us."

La Mark helped the two young men up, and they looked back at Green from under great falls of silver hair—the hallmark of the werewolf as opposed to another were-creature. They looked disconsolate and ashamed, and Green

nodded his head and gave them a wave as a salute and everybody kept inching towards the epicenter of the agony.

A minute went by, and then another, and Green became breathlessly aware that midnight had passed and that dawn was nearing. It was all he could do to not wrap his arms around his middle and howl to the night sky to bring her back, and he was looking desperately up to the barely waning moon at the northwest horizon when he saw something tiny and bright flicker across it and towards them in a glitter of azure and sunrise orange. He knew those colors and his breath caught, and so did Bracken's.

"Holy shit...is that who I think it is?" Nicky asked, hope throbbing in his voice, and Green and Bracken nodded yes, their pulses thready with the exhilaration of, finally, at last a lead.

Then Bracken saw what was trailing behind the tiny creature and said, "Aww, fuck...is that *what* I think it is?"

Green saw what he was talking about and groaned himself. "Goddess," he swore. "She must really be desperate."

And that thought shook everybody from their trance of hoping at the moon and the whole group of them took off running in the direction of Cory's sprite.

CORY

The Queen of every-fucking-thing

I don't know how long I lay flopped awkwardly on the futon, stunned and unconscious, but when I surfaced it was to a buzzing that *wasn't* in my head. I looked up and there was, of all things, a sprite, flitting anxiously about my face until I held up a steadying hand to make it stop moving quite so quickly because I was getting dizzy and queasy all over again.

The poor thing stopped moving, and I smiled in reassurance, and then the dizzy and queasy reasserted itself with the force of an anvil falling on my head. Groaning, gasping, gurgling on my own blood which was running down my throat again from my goddamned broken nose, I rolled off the futon onto all fours and did what I always do when I get hurt. I felt much better when I was done, and I looked around blearily for something to wash off with. There, in the

corner next to the refrigerator was a sink I hadn't noticed earlier, and I made it my top priority, sort of.

I was going to stand up—really I was—but I put a hand on the futon and it wobbled and then I wobbled and I decided that maybe standing up was for pussies so I crawled to the sink on all fours, hoping the world would stop spinning when I got there. No such luck, but after I'd hauled myself up by grabbing the blessedly stable counter and pulling with all my might and washed the blood off my face and rinsed and spat, I thought maybe I could learn to walk in a place where the furniture got bigger and smaller and did a little nautical dance around any point of reference I might choose.

I barely made it back to the futon without doing the Nestea plunge on that beautiful carpet and when I did get back, I fell on it hard enough to make the wood creak and looked anxiously at my tiny companion.

"Heya," I murmured, and she got close enough for me to try to make out features instead of just the insane glimmer of lights that usually came with sprites. As opposed to fairies, who usually looked like flowers and leaves, the sprites often resembled something animal. This one looked like a pet mouse I'd had in the third grade before Griselda, my mother's cat had gotten it—except she was blinking rapidly in sky blue and sunset orange—my colors, or so Green had assured me last summer. "Are you *my* guardian sprite?" I asked loopily, and she nodded, her little Tinkerbell wings blurring happiness.

It would figure that they'd sicced a sprite on me, I thought ruefully. Of course—I'd done the same thing to Davy, and it wasn't like they loved me *less* than I'd cared for my friend. "How long ya been with me?" I asked, and gave up trying to focus my eyes for a moment and just let them drift closed.

Her insistent buzzing made me shake my head (ou—uuch!) and open my eyes and I tried again. "Did they assign you tonight?"

The tiny, fur-less, mouse-featured head bobbed once, and I smiled gently (I hope) to let her know that it was well and dandy that she'd been hanging out with me, probably staying invisible if they could do that, while we tried to hunt down our enemy like a bear in a cave. "So...can you go get Green and tell him where I am?" Pretty-pretty-please-with-a-cherry-on-top-of-that-Goddess-sundae-thank-you-very-much?

No dice. The little sunset wings drooped in a staggering show of

depression for a being four inches tall and I shrugged and tried not to let my own disappointment show. Two tiny hands came up and shielded the even tinier eyes, and I realized that her problem would be the same problem the elves had when we'd been fighting. She could probably find Green—but she wouldn't be able to see the Hollow Man's lair. The Goddess creatures tended to work on such a metaphorical level—this little house had probably dropped out of sight for the elves as soon as the stench became overpowering for the vampires, and I nodded sympathetically and then had to close my eyes to keep the whole world from bobbing in time.

I opened my eyes again, and reached slowly to the floor to where my yarn bag had fallen because I was terrified and hurt and hell, it was there. I mean, I had a couple of pointy sticks, a little pair of scissors—he could be cut, right? He'd been nursing healing wounds even as we'd spoken. Maybe I could use the itty-bitty scissors to dig into his wrist and snip a big artery or something—there *had* to be a reason the darn things were forbidden on airlines, didn't there?

If I could have done so without pain, I would have shaken my head. It was Green's sweater, that's all...nothing lethal—just sticks and string and a tiny bit of human magic soaking into the fiber that came from my heart and the oils on my hands. And suddenly I had an idea—as Dr. Seuss would say, A Wonderful Awful Idea.

"You wouldn't be able to *bring* something to Green?" I asked hopefully, and the little wings perked right up and the horrible, clashing colors (my horrible, clashing colors) started beating like a disco ball.

The first thing I had to do was go over his sweater and tie the little ends I'd left into knots if I hadn't already. That wasn't so hard—I'd done most of those. The unnatural part was when I had to worry my finished loops off on the back and then the front and then the first sleeve, so I could attach the yarn and have it rip out all in one smooth rope—my little companion could probably drag the front of the yarn quite some distance, but if it caught on a snag some thousand yards out, I couldn't say for certain it wouldn't break. Although, as I eyed the perfect cables, the hours of work and heartbreak and hope and prayer for Green's safe return that I was about to destroy in one flight of the Goddess' smallest emissary, I thought it wasn't the yarn we had to worry about breaking—it was my heart, dammit. It was supposed to end up a sweater, not a lifeline out of the Minotaur's maze.

I narrowed my eyes and tried to focus on some other solution to getting the hell out of this damned basement so I could go shove my foot up the Hollow Man's ass, and realized that I'd been seeing double the whole time I'd been tying knots. No wonder they were so nervous about me, I thought with disgust. Bracken practically gets eviscerated and he's back breaking things within the hour. I get one lousy backhand to the face and I'm about totaled. Ruefully I looked back at the sweater, now bound together from piece to piece by strategically placed knots, and decided I should probably attach the spare balls of yarn to it as well.

Finally I was done and ready to sacrifice Green's beloved sweater to the greater good. "You really *can* find Green, right?" I asked apprehensively. It would really suck if I did all this and it didn't work, but the tiny little bottom gave a flounce of impatience and I said a small prayer over my soon-to-be-demolished work and pulled the needle out, gave her the snipped end of the working yarn, and told her to go find Green. She buzzed cheerfully, a whole art-deco Christmas tree of lights in a five inch space, and zoomed to the door. She stopped there and made herself germ tiny (I assumed, since I could still see the yarn) and then disappeared through the keyhole, the sleeve zipping into nothing in her wake.

I collapsed on the futon and tried to keep myself from passing out by doing the math. We had been about two miles away from Hollow Man's house when I'd been abducted which was how many yards? But it didn't matter, because they *must have* gotten closer since I'd been here, so if there were two thousand yards of yarn in the sweater and they were a mile away...aw, fuck-it...I'd just sit here and feel the blood trickle down my scalp and watch my work self-destruct and pray for rescue before the Hollow Man saw it.

I didn't have long to wait. "What in the hell is this!" He roared, and came crashing through the steel door, making it swing open both quickly and ponderously at the same time. I looked at him through my swollen face (my eye had closed up while I'd been tying knots and I couldn't breathe out of my nose anymore) and said, "What is what?" I could be flippant, I thought carefully, because the sweater had stopped unzipping about five minutes ago—all that was left was the beginning ribbing on the bottom of the back, but, by-golly, that was a start.

"What is this string?" he asked, looking at me, propped up in the corner of the couch and cradling the last of the yarn on my lap like a dead pet. He bent to

pick it up and then dropped it with a howl that surprised me enough to sit up. "What did you do to it? It *hurts*..."

Great, I thought fuzzily. If I'd known that, I could have just thrown it on him whole and saved me a whole bunch of work. "Did you think I was just going to sit here?" I asked him around the cuts on the inside of my mouth. Carefully I sat up a little more. I'd been charging as much power as I could since the sprite had disappeared, and since I'd just been loved by the three men I loved, and I was terrified for the boys and more pissed off than words that I'd been captured, pain or no pain that was no small amount of magical fusion at my disposal. I just had to be very, very careful about how I used it.

"You *hit* me, leave me alone here and promise to torture someone who's mine, and you think I'm just going to cry about it?" I stood up and pretended the world wasn't spinning. "Assmunch, I've got so much more to live for than that, and you've got a lot to learn about love." And with that I let my power loose—not as a ball or anything that would blow him up, but as a shield around him.

He shrieked, and, please-Goddess-let-it-be-so, I could swear I heard the howl of dogs and hiss of giant cats somewhere in the distance. Then he charged at my shield, and I planted my feet and froze my will and grunted in triumph when he slammed into the glowing bubble of magic and bounced back, leaving a smear of burnt orange spitting on the side of the field.

He hit the shield again, and again and again, and each time I grit my teeth and pit my power and will against his power and will, and eventually he squat in the middle of the circle and glared at me from his feeding face, and I snarled back, although his feeding face was truly horrific.

Most vampires, when their feeding face took over, simply looked like highly sexual predators—hollowed cheeks, popping tendons, glowing eyes, extended jaws and teeth—they were almost beautiful in an alien, terrifying way. The Hollow Man was different—his feeding face revealed him, truly for what he was—his flesh seemed to be running down his face like melted wax to reveal porous, brown and moldy bones beneath. His musculature, his skeleton, even his skin seemed to be rotting, wasting away, leaving only the teeth, pointed, porous, and jagged, to support that decaying flesh. No wonder he stank—he was decomposing even as he walked around in undeath. The vampires didn't decompose—they were kept alive with the Goddess' will. This guy—he'd corrupted the Goddess' will. He'd had Goddess-borne power and abused it and

all that was holding him together were the rules of the magic, not the love. He truly was hollow—from his heart to his mind to his flesh, there was nothing of substance, not even his blood.

"You can't keep me in here forever," he hissed, and like vampires, his vocal chords had changed—but his were raspy, undeveloped, and his hiss was truly that—like a pissed-off kitten with laryngitis. "I'll get out, and then I'll kill you, and I'll take over your children, and your lovers will die from the pain...and then I'll drain them too."

I stared him down, from the hideous flesh to the eyeballs that didn't glow but only rolled around greenly in their rotted orbs. "I don't have to keep you in here forever." I grinned ferociously, the pain of moving my cheek and jaw muscles agonizing but worth it. "I only have to keep you in here until they come to get me. And in the meantime, you're not hurting the boys and you can't set a trap for my lovers and you're just fucked, so sit back and enjoy, because we've got something truly nasty planned for you when this is over."

At that moment I heard Green and Bracken blow through the front of the house, shouting my name.

"And buddy, this is so fucking over," I growled, then shouted, "Down here, guys!" through my broken lips. "Have Grace get the boys and get out of here—they're somewhere upstairs."

There was a racket, and a, "I've got them...oh Goddess..." Before I heard Arturo urging Grace out of the house, hopefully soothing her and telling her that there was some way, please Goddess, some miracle that would take that dark mark off their souls.

And then there was a distinctly un-sidhe-like clatter and the door blew open again and I was sandwiched between Green and Bracken as they tried to crush the life out of me with their relief and their beautiful love.

"I liked the sprite," I said after a moment when the shield brightened to a blinding sheen because their touch was pumping me full of what I used to keep my power strong. Then I coughed and sputtered, because even though Bracken was hugging me from the back, Green hadn't healed me yet and Bracken's touch was making my nose bleed again. Green rubbed his thumb gently over my shattered cheekbone and my swollen jaw and eye, his wide-spaced eyes narrowing in a distinctly uncharacteristic charge of anger.

"Is everybody okay?" I asked, still sputtering, but Green's fingers were gently probing my bruises and wiping away the still spilling bright red blood.

"Everybody's fine," Bracken said gently, breathing into my hair, which felt wet and looking at Green over my shoulder. Green was showing me what his true rage looked like—and I realized that he might have scared me a few times, but I'd never seen him as angry as he was now.

"Is that him?" he snarled, squinting into the power bubble, at what, to him, must have been a dark blur.

I nodded my head, massaging his chest with my hands to try to calm him down.

"I'll kill him," he growled, his voice sounding very Victorian Cockney. "I'll pull 'is fookin' guts ou' wi' me teeth." He took a huge, shuddering breath and turned towards Hollow Man to do just that, and I reached up and caught his beloved face in my hands. I touched the corners of his eyes, his elfin ears, his long jaw, and felt the muscles there bunched up in a snarl of pure hatred. How could I have ever put this man—this sidhe—into a box of 'gentle lover' I asked myself, amazed at my own stupidity. Bracken was stroking my hair, just my hair, not touching my scalp with his fingers and I took Green's hands in my own and kissed them.

"Heal me, beloved," I asked wryly, looking with grateful tears into both sets of Green's eyes, dancing around in my fractured vision, "Because I've got something worse in mind."

Green shuddered again, and nodded, and bent and kissed my brow and I felt that queasy slide of flesh that meant my body was using magic to regenerate and it never felt quite human to do that. I also felt that Green was tired. How much had it cost them, I wondered, turning and hugging Bracken, then touching the blood that had soaked into the sleeves of his sweater from wounds that I couldn't see now but had been there. How much had it taken to wade through the Hollow Man's evil and come to my rescue? I stood on my tiptoes, supported by the broadness of Bracken's hand on the small of my back and kissed his jaw, watching his tawny eyes close in gratitude that I was still alive, and then looked at both of them, and at Nicky who had just come down the stairs. I reached out my hand to him and he stopped standing hesitantly and rushed in for the hug, and a grateful kiss, his dusty animal smell clinging to me reassuringly, and then I stepped away from all of them and said it.

"You know what I need to do, right?" Goddess, I hoped they did, because I was feeling strong now, but the Hollow Man was pacing his magic prison of light like a bull and I couldn't hold him there forever.

Green stepped forward and took my hands and nodded. "And you know what we need to do, right?" he asked seriously, and I nodded back.

"You need to remind me who I am," I said quietly, and Nicky broke the moment.

"You'd better forgive us," he said seriously, and I managed a grin from my now healthy, healed face. Nicky used both hands to rip off a piece of his sweatshirt and gave it to me to clean the blood off, and I was grateful.

"If you called me a bitch, it had better be written across my fat white ass," I told him dryly, and then I smiled grimly at all of them, meeting their eyes firmly and with all the confidence I didn't feel. "I love you all," I said, and then I moved to the couch and grabbed the itty bitty scissors from my yarn bag and then turned towards my shield.

I'd never stepped through my own power before—it was exhilarating and commonplace at once. It was my power, so it was an extension of me, but it was the part of me that everybody else saw and I only generated. I felt pretty damned good, I thought as I stepped through, and then I sobered, there in the shining bubble of my magic, alone with Hollow Man again.

He lunged, of course, but I was ready for him—and so was Green, because visibility or no visibility it was his power that pinned him to the floor.

"You wanted to taste me?" I asked tauntingly. His eyes rolled, and he *whined*—a grown man whining because he didn't get his way was almost as repulsive as that horribly sullied flesh. "You did want to taste me, didn't you? You wanted to be inside me while you tasted me." Bracken made a wild animal sound outside the shield but I ignored him. He'd trust me—I knew he'd trust me. "That's what you said, right?"

"I blow people up," he said, his dreamy, wandering voice still focused on that thing, that elusive thing he wanted, but couldn't name; needed, but couldn't obtain; imagined, but couldn't know. "I'm part sidhe—you can't kill me, not with sunlight, not with decapitation—I know. The sylphs tried. I don't burn, I don't dissolve...I just am..."

I bent over him and used the pointy ends of the scissors to prick a blunt hole in my thumb, then I grabbed his hand, pressed flat against the lovely fuchsia colored rug, and did the same thing for him. "You blow up people who don't know who they are," I told him, enjoying the little human whimper that came when I made that wound just a little bit bigger, digging in past the mottled brown and green flesh of his hands until a blackish, orange-ish ooze began to seep out. "You've been lucky that way. Sylphs are waiting for love to cement their identities. Were-creatures wouldn't have become were-creatures if they weren't searching, waiting, trying to find that thing they needed but couldn't name. Chuck and Shane and Chris—they were all lost creatures, poor creatures, without an identity of their own." I moved my thumb, dripping a little blood, up the center of his chest, and watched him eye the blood hungrily. "Jon Case—he'd just started his first love affair with another man—he was still surprised to find out who he was."

"Not me," I said, savoring this knowledge, knowing that if I was wrong it could be the last good thing I felt, but also knowing in my gut that I was right simply because I felt it and my identity was not just a good thing, it was a *great* thing. "I know exactly who I am. And if I ever forget, I've got people I love more than life to remind me. So...who are you, Hollow Man?" I asked, watching a fat red drop of my blood plop on his chin. "Do you really want to know?"

And then I held my thumb over his mouth, and at the same time another fat drop fell past those rotted teeth into the black mold-cave that his mouth had become, I steeled myself for the awfulness and licked the blackish ooze from his wrist.

You can't brace yourself for something that horrible, never in a million trillion years.

It was nothing—nothing at all—no love, no hate, no pain...just a knowledge that you were empty. It was such a familiar feeling...I remembered it, deep in my stomach...nights behind a cash register, pounding drivel into my computer, hating my professors for looking through me and my customers for looking past me, hating my parents for not seeing who I really was and myself for not being worth the seeing...that hate, that need...you could deny it, you could feed it with sex and with drugs and with food and with other people's pain but that need...that need to be seen, to be known, to be recognized...who had ever recognized me? Who had ever seen me for what I could be? Who had ever believed I was capable of more than just some lousy fucking job under corpse-

fluorescent lights, pissing off the dumb-fuck locals because I fucking could...

"Beloved," Green said and I jerked to myself. I was me, I was violently angry, I was capable of hurting people because I just fucking coul...

"Beloved..." Bracken said. I loved Bracken...I loved to piss him off—god he was so overbearing sometimes, wouldn't it be great if he just beat his own head into a bloody...

"Cory," Nicky said. What in the hell was he whining about now? Couldn't he see I was goddamned busy? I was trying to run the fucking world and who gave a shit about his poor, hurt little ego anyway and *Jesus* his fucking drivel was fucking killing me...and I was so goddamned angry, so consumed with impatience and fury and couldn't they just give me, just once, just goddamned once, a little fucking respect...no one knew...no one gave a shit...they just wanted and took and wanted and I could just scream, scream and blow the world up with my magic because I was powerful and burning and they were jack-diddly-squat...

"Corinne Carol-Anne..." Oh, Goddess, I wasn't saying these things out loud, was I? I stood a little at the sound of their voices saying my complete name in sync and thought my mouth tasted like dried puke and I think it was glued shut with that lactic acid thing and couldn't one of those assholes get me a glass of... "Kirkpatrick op-Crocken Green."

... water? Oh, Goddess...what had I done...they hadn't heard me, had they? I had been spewing filth...I was so stupid, such an idiot to not recognize them, how could they love me, how could anyone love me? I was so goddamned dumber-than-a-box-of-snot stupid, coming in here like this. Who did I think I was? I was nobody—how could I kill this guy, how could I make it all better when I was nobody? My head hurt and my chest hurt, and it was just what I deserved—I'd killed a hundred vampires, it was my fault, mine alone that Adrian was dead, he'd flown in to defend me, if I'd just been able to keep my mouth shut...

"Beloved of Adrian," Green said firmly, "Beloved of my heart," he continued. "*Ou'e'eir*, stubborn woman, lovely lass, beautiful lover..." he continued on, saying things in elfish and my eyes teared up, just hearing his lovely, lovely voice telling me who I'd earned the right to be in his eyes, and then I heard Bracken speaking, "Stubborn bitch, *due'ane*, beloved of my heart, beloved to my brother, beloved to my leader, terrible tease, lost little girl, warm

woman in my bed, Cory op Crocken..." And then Nicky, "Bossy heifer, *ou'e'ane*, sweet kid, wise student, friend and lover, confidant, terrifying leader, beloved of Green..." And I listened and listened and heard them, resonating in my heart, resonating in my soul, harmonizing in the core of the person I had come to be, and then I knew myself.

I was a good person. I was kind. I was fierce. I was powerful. I was beloved. And I wasn't angry—I hadn't been angry for a very long time. I took a breath and felt clean and free, when I'd felt tight and bound with that chronic pain of want, and then I knew...really knew, how close I had come to being lost—not just tonight, when I would have died a stranger to myself—but a year ago, when I was that stranger, with only the little seeds of who I was now growing in my heart.

I could have been Hollow Man—I could have let my bitterness, my alienation, my anger become my whole world, my whole heart, spending my life staring at my shoes and needing love without giving it until I just needed and needed and needed and swallowed up the world with my bottomless, endless want, but I hadn't.

I *had* looked up, I *had* reached for what the world had to offer, and now I was the person who loved three men with all that I was, and I was loved in return and there wasn't anything better in the world than that.

With an effort I swallowed and stood from where I'd been crouched over the Hollow Man's writhing body. He whined and thrashed and swore at me...and then, piteously, called Twilight's name. I looked up and met Green's eyes, and he shook his head. Apparently 'Steve' had been dead to Twilight for too long—the only reason he'd come tonight had been for us.

"He's not coming," I croaked through a throat that felt like it had been arc-welded together with recycled tequila. I looked down on the dissolution of a human being who used senseless power to feed too much nagging need. He was still repulsive, but now even his anger was gone. He was consumed with the struggle of forces inside of him, and I knew the feeling and the terrible, terrible cost it exacted on your body and soul.

I was soaked in sweat, and my sweatshirt was already bloody from my nose so I was pretty sure I stank as well. My hands were shaking so badly I almost stabbed myself in the eye with my thumb when I went to pull them through my ravaged hair and my breath was shuddering out of my chest like I'd

just run five miles at warp speed. But I was alive. I'd started to come apart, to unravel, to lose everything that was me, but I hadn't—my lovers had kept me whole, simply by loving me because I was me.

"You died for him twenty years ago," I said now, proud of how solid I sounded even though I felt almost translucently weak, "And I'm glad he's not here to see you now. This ends now, Hollow Man." He grunted and started a mrewlling whine that I knew was going to get worse before it ended and I turned on wobbly knees and left him to suffer through to the horror that was coming next.

My shields were weak, but they still infused me with my own power, and I barreled through them and into Green's waiting arms. Bracken leaned over my shoulders from behind and Nicky wriggled into Green's embrace somehow and I trembled inside their circle of faith until I thought the chattering of my teeth would sever my tongue, but we stayed there and served as witness to the horror that happened next.

Hollow Man struggled, strained against Green's restraints until his flesh actually started to strip away. His raw, rotting skin rubbed against that warm, living light of power and that whine escalated, became a howl through clenched, decaying teeth, and then a wail of raspy anguish and then, with all that was inside of him, all of the hate and the anger and the emptiness, he opened his mouth and screamed...Goddess, I've never heard such a scream...it felt like the train outside was passing the house, then it felt like the train was crashing through the building and I watched in fascination as a crack opened up in the concrete floor under the shield even as we crouched and held our ears (well mine were muffled by big, lovely male bodies) and screamed in the pain of the sound of his shriek.

"It burns!" He cried. "It hurts...Its bright and it hurts...what did I do...Oh Twilight, pleeeeeeeeeeeeeaaaaaassssseeeeeeeeeee..." And then, oh Goddess, the agony of that wail, the excoriating pain of a soul-freezing void that would never, ever, ever be filled, but still we stayed to listen, to watch, to *smell* (the stench made black spots dance in front of my eyes) because we had to, he had hurt us and stalked us for so long, and Davy and Kyle and Chris and Shane and Chuck and Ellen Beth and Jon Case and Hallow all deserved justice, all deserved vengeance, all deserved balance, and balance was what was struggling inside Hollow Man even as he screamed, a balance against the sunshine that was my blood and the blackness that was his body, heart and soul. It went on forever,

until our own throats were sore with shrieking in time to it, but the sound of our screams was muffled, inconsequential to the wail coming from him, and his thrashing, flopping, dying body seemed to stretch at the seams, to bubble like a faulty balloon.

Abruptly the scream died away to be replaced by an animal whimper of simple, excruciating physical agony and a moan that finally, finally, stirred my pity because it was the first human sound he'd made since he'd dumped me in this steel room. Abruptly the whimper died away to a gurgle and his body splatted against the walls of my shield like a poodle in a microwave.

Balance had been achieved.

I made them let me walk out of the house on my own, just as soon as I'd guzzled water from the faucet and rinsed the streaming sweat and leftover blood off my face. Green, who hadn't stopped touching me and who had wrapped his arms around me from behind even as I cleaned up, started to swing me up into his arms, but his muscles trembled and I stopped him.

"Were there many injured?" I asked Bracken quietly, both arms around Green's waist and looking back over my shoulder. "After the fight?"

"Almost everybody," Bracken said, eyeing his leader with compassion, and I took that narrow, beautiful, pointed face in my hands and kissed Green's sensual mouth until he moaned softly, and then I pulled away and touched foreheads.

"I'll be okay, *ou'e'hm*" I whispered. "If everyone's out there, let them see us walk out together, okay?" He nodded, his jaw trembling, and I leaned my head against his chest.

"That was so close," he said, and he was the only one who had the courage to tell me. "We could see you...growing transparent...your skin threatening to fly off your flesh...oh, beloved...we almost weren't enough."

"But you were," I choked, not wanting to think about how close I had come to losing my center. "In the end, that's all that matters."

I didn't look at the rest of the house as we walked up the stairs and out the door. I didn't care what it looked like—I was left with a vague impression of white walls and pricey, dark-wood trim, after the gleaming steel walls of the bomb-shelter basement. I didn't care who had lived there, and I could only hope

that, as weird as it had sounded, they really were in Spain or Brazil or Bum-fuck-South-of-Hell, and not greasy spots in the original house or piles of dust in the garden. My capacity to give beyond the people on our hill had been blasted out of me by my own struggle for self. I was Green's hill; Green's hill was all I could save.

We walked out the door into the teeth-chattering pre-dawn chill and I looked gratefully to my people as they surrounded me. Renny and Max almost knocked me over first and I wrapped my arms around them and hugged, wincing in sympathy as the blood matting their fur from their poor ears soaked into my jacket. Nicky's ears had bled too, the blood sticking his hair to his head like feathers. Mario was right behind them, dressed in Max's jacket, and he too had splashes of crimson gleaming wetly in the dark, and I could only hug them and be hugged by them and commiserate and weep to get out of there, to go home.

Twilight had his arms wrapped around Marcus and Phillip and they sagged against him, and Cocklebur was doing the same for Kyle, and they looked at us like people waking out of a coma. I caught Twilight's eyes as I was surrounded by friends to see how he was doing.

"I don't even remember his name," he said simply. "Did you ever find out?"

I had tried to live as the Goddess made the elves, but I ate meat because I had to supplement my diet and I was happy to limit the number of lovers in my bed because I just wasn't wired that way and I had just blooded an enemy to kill him. I was not an elf.

"No," I lied softly. "He was just the Hollow Man." And we nodded together, and then, as one, many-legged entity, we started to walk back across that terrible expanse of green, starlit (the moon was down now) lawn towards the cars, because it was getting perilously close to dawn, and even though the smell and the fatigue it caused was dissipating, and even more as we moved from the little cottage, we were all still weak and I don't think anybody was in any shape to go hyperspeed. I looked around.

"Where are Arturo and Grace and the boys?" I asked, and a sudden foreboding flashed through me. I wasn't done this night, not by even a little.

"They went for the cars," Mario said quietly. "There was something wrong...Grace wouldn't say what, but she was really freaked out... I don't know

how she could move that fast, she was as wiped out as the rest of us.”

I nodded and tilted my head back to the cleansing stars, and made a concerted gathering of thoughts and energy and directed it at Grace. *They're marked.* I told her, and then I stumbled, because I was tired and not paying attention, and Bracken swung me into his arms and I let him, I *clung* to him, trying to swim to some shore of understanding through our exhaustion.

Goddess...they smell like him... Grace's voice in my head was hysterical, and I was so new at this brain-chatter thing that I couldn't get a handle on her.

"Green, tell Arturo to calm her down," I begged. "Tell her I've got an idea, but they need to come get me and the vampires..." and I groaned because the only other place we could put the vampires was in the trunk of the Caddy, and that's probably where they were right now...Oh, Goddess...I was so confused. I couldn't do people and cars right now...I could only think of the boys...

Marcus and Phillip were suddenly there at my elbow, even as Bracken strode through the night. "We'll get ourselves to safety, Lady Cory," Marcus murmured, with a sweet kiss on my head that sent a shock of awareness through me that rebounded off Bracken. I saw Brack's eyes widen and he gave Marcus a tired grin that we both ignored, but the buzz was there and it gave me enough strength to focus my thought. I looked over at Green for help and he nodded.

"Grace and Arturo are in the Caddy with the boys," he said. "Nicky, you need to go with the weres in the SUV." Before, I think Nicky would have protested—now he simply nodded reluctantly, and accepted. Green continued speaking, almost to himself, I think, to try to set up the logistics in his own head.

"No one can fly right now, and we're a fucking breath away from dawn, and I think whatever Cory's got in mind has to happen before then, right luv?" he asked, and I nodded, so grateful for him that I almost wept against Bracken's neck.

"Yeah..." I breathed. "I think at sunrise, that mark is there to stay." And then I was in Grace's head, and I was explaining, in part, what I had in mind.

We were walking down a large expanse of grass, cutting across it towards Matson, when we heard a beep behind us and turned, and I grunted, half in humor, half in frustration, because we had to backtrack across what was a huge expanse of lawn.

In a burst of power Nicky and Mario morphed and elves and vampires blurred, picking up the were-animals on the way. In moments we were stuffed in cars and heading towards home.

Green and Bracken were in the front of the Caddy with Arturo, and I was in the back with Grace and the boys. They were barely breathing and completely unconscious and in spite of the stench of the Hollow Man that permeated them, I hefted Graeme from her and held him in my lap and squeezed him to me, trying to stave off despair.

"Tell me how it works," I said to Grace. Plan. Plan and think and plan some more and maybe we don't have to face the possibility that they're lost forever. "Marking. Vampires die their day death and their souls pass through their loved ones and it leaves a mark...what does it feel like—how do you know it's done?"

"Cory...I..." Even in the darkened car I could see her embarrassed, anxious glance at Arturo as he drove. "That damned stubborn man just stayed with me, that's all," she fretted, smelling the top of Gavin's head instinctively and closing her eyes in pain when she scented evil instead of puppy-dog little boy. "And then I was inside him and through him, and I felt...all of him...we were like one person...his heartbeat was mine, his blood was mine, his past..." She rolled her eyes. "All bajillion freakin' years of it, was mine...I knew it. And then it was gone, but...it was like the smell of incense in your clothes...the smell of your beloved on your soul." She looked at me in empty dark. "How can they live with that stench on their souls? How can they love and laugh and play and grow if they stink of all that need!"

"We'll fix it," I said fervently, hoping, hoping against hope that I knew how to make it true.

We had gotten to Foresthill Road and crossed the bridge when Bracken said something to Green and Green gave an order to Arturo and suddenly the car was swerving off the road onto a turnabout, then jumping the turnabout and heading towards Scary Tree, the canyon yawning beyond it.

"I hate Scary Tree," I said blankly, loud enough for the men to hear me.

"Scary Tree sucks up bad power in the area," Green said tersely. "You want some place for that shite to go, right?"

Right. "Oh." Oh, Goddess, I was really going to do this.

The car fishtailed to a halt on the still drying grasses about a hundred feet from Scary Tree, and we all got out. I was struggling to pull Graeme out of the car when Bracken stepped in and took him from me from the front while Arturo did the same thing for Grace. We scrambled out after them and started trotting across the field under a sky that had gone from purple velvet to charcoal gray. "Bracken, Green, I need you across from me." Behind us I heard the SUV and the hearse go off road and we stopped—not close enough for the tree's shadow to touch us, but close enough to see the yawning green-speckled red canyon beyond.

"Nicky, hurry," I called over my shoulder and fell to my knees in the thick grasses that had grown lush during the rains and were barely starting to die now, a crackly, cats-tongue carpet. I worried about snakes and then thought we might be a little high up for rattlers. I wasn't sure, and I was with elves who probably had snake repellent pumping through their veins so I stopped borrowing trouble and reached out for the boys and wrapped my arms around them when Bracken and Arturo gave them to me.

"It's like that night at the lake, right?" I asked no one in particular, looking up at Green and Bracken with eyes that were probably as terrified as I was.

Grace nodded and put her hand on my shoulder. "Sweetheart...if you don't think you can do this..."

"I can't live with myself if I don't try..." I whispered, then looked at Green again, trying to hold onto my courage. "But I'm not as strong as I thought I was..." He'd said he could see me fading, growing translucent, getting ready to fly apart.

Green fell to his knees across from me and put his hands on my shoulders. "But all together we are as strong as you know we are," he said, and the shaking of his hands in my hair as I'd recovered from Hollow Man haunted me.

"You really can't lie, can you?" Please, beloved. Please lie to me and tell me this is going to be just hunky-fucking-dory...Please.

"Not at all," he said so calmly I had to believe him. Then, evenly, "Nicky, Bracken, come here with us. She's going to push herself through them, and she needs to have us to know when to go back."

"Holy fucking Goddess," Bracken breathed, falling to his knees next to me

in shock. "If I'd known that I would have picked her up and dragged her home."

Nicky sank down to my other side, his mouth open in surprise. "You have got to be shitting me." They each sat a hand on my knee, and the warmth of their fingers started to radiate up my legs, easing the pre-dawn chill. They loved me. I could do this.

"Marcus, Phillip..." I ordered tersely. "Get in the hearse. Take them with you." I nodded towards Kyle, Grace and Ellis, and was a little miffed when none of them moved.

"No offense, Lady Cory," Marcus said, taking a nod from Phillip and the others. "But fuck off. We're here until we know our queen's okay."

I took a breath that stammered in my throat and took a look at the ever lightening sky and thought "I have to do this." And then I thought about Green, and how badly I wanted to be with him, alone, right now. So badly that even sitting across from him was too far away, so badly that his touch on my knees was not enough. And an ache began to build in my chest. It was like my power, but it was a yearning, a pain, an agonizing need to be with my beloved, and it was forcing me towards him. I kept my muscles locked and let it force me.

My body stopped breathing for a moment, but I wasn't in it, so it didn't bother me. I was inside Graeme, smart, seeing everything even flaws, secrets and lies, feeling his mother's hands on his forehead when he was tired or worried, hearing her sharp voice on the phone with his father, the texture of his favorite blanket, the exact pattern of shadows on his bedroom wall at night, the even, comforting sound of his brother's breathing in the bed next to him, the fierce desire to protect Gavin from harm, from censure—which Gavin often got—from his father...and over it all, starting to seep into his skin, that knowledge that the world was evil, rotten to the core, frightening, terrible, and that no one, no one at all, could save him from it...

/ will baby. And then I pushed through, aiming towards Green, my self oozing through his pores, squishing the evil out like the stink of sweat, feeling it evaporate as it hit the air...I was exhausted...my vision of the world wavered between the two boys...I wanted to breathe, I wanted to be myself, I wanted to return...

Green. I had to make it to Green.

Gavin... Sweet, sweet boy...his wonder at the little bald creature who would be his little brother, his acceptance of everything, from Santa Claus to his father's criticism as true, his unwillingness to ask for better from his parents in case they should take away from him the burning, bright and proud little man who loved him unreservedly, who kept him safe, the soft fur of the kittens he fed under the house until his mother took them to the pound, the models his brother asked to have for his birthday so he could give them to Gavin who was magic with his hands and his patience and his fervent wish to not attract any more attention than necessary, the indefinable, un-nameable difference in brain chemistry that would make his life difficult, make his life sweet, define his life and alienate his parents...and bad things were already going to happen, he knew it he heard his dad use bad words for people like him and this haze, this terrible smell, this horrible slimy gunk slithering down his skin was a small price to pay for not saying anything, for just holding it in and stamping down on his heart so no one would know he was different no one would yell at him no one would hurt him anymore...

I won't hurt you. I'll make it go away.

Green. And again, that other push, one more mighty heave and my body was bursting with the need to breathe and the evil was evaporating, misting from my soul into the air, but my whole psyche was doing the pee-pee dance, swollen with the need to breathe with the need to feel the inside of my own skin with the need to...

Touch Green. Oh Goddess, there he was, I could smell the faint wildflower of his skin, the mint of his breath, feel the silk of his flesh, the wine of his blood and then I was inside...

No. Oh beloved...

He pushed me out, gently, like a toddler being put back in his bed, and Bracken and Nicky were calling to me, I could hear their voices screaming my many names, feel their hands on my thighs, on my shoulders and they needed me they needed me they needed me...the silver light of dawn blurred by my vision and the wind passed through my soul and in a whirl of the people around me I was suddenly...

GASP! Sweet, sweet oxygen, sweet, sweet air in my lungs...a breath and another and another and awareness of bodies in my arms, of bigger bodies embracing me, of Gavin and Graeme, clean and as pure as they had been two

nights ago, smelling like sweaty little boys, fast asleep in my arms, of Bracken and Nicky shuddering, sobbing in reaction and relief that I was all right, of Green, reaching across the space of our bodies to touch his thumb to my lip and his fingers to my cheek, the golden light of the horizon just peaking up beyond his...

Holy shit.

With strength I wouldn't have guessed I had I sat up, freeing my face from that press of love and relief.

"Vampires get the fuck undercover," I said distinctly, and there was a breeze behind me as my people went hurtling towards vehicles, and I heard Grace's surprised squawk as Arturo shoved her in the Caddy's trunk and threw a tarp on top of her then slammed the lid, all movement in hyperspeed, and the faint hum of machinery as everyone else shmushed themselves into the back of the hearse and pushed the buttons that dropped the back platform down and pulled the roll-top lid over them.

Then I pressed my cheek to that coarse, tangled hair and felt helpless, exhausted tears sliding down my cheek. The sky didn't look so bright as it had a moment before, and I had a chance to wonder at the grey filming between myself and the world when I felt the rough tongue of a were-cat on the back of my neck. I mumbled something incoherent, and then the gray turned to black and I was fast asleep.

BRACKEN

Binding Off

I knew that she was alive because I was alive—that is the nature of our binding. But you cannot tell panic that the thing it fears most has not happened because the thing you don't fear at all has not happened either.

When her shoulders stopped moving with breath and her face lost color and she slumped forward like a newly-minted corpse, Nicky and I shouted at her until our throats shredded and our breath ran short.

It was worse than her struggle with the Hollow Man, because then every name we called seemed to bring her back to herself. This was like shouting at a

coffin for the dead man to wake up, and that's what we did while our hearts pounded against our chest with the force to shatter our ribs.

Adrian didn't leave a body when he died again—vampires don't—and he was my only loss. To see her, with her life-force absent, cold, still, was as alien to me as a crimson sky, and as horrible as the nearly transparent forms of the two little boys sliding down her tiny lap into the deep grasses.

Suddenly, Graeme's body was as clear and as real as the screams rending my throat. The small group of our people standing behind Cory, watching in horrified fascination suddenly gave a collective gasp, and I wondered what had happened to Scary Tree behind me. Cory's lips were paling as I watched, though, and then bluing, and she hadn't moved, twitched, gasped or shuddered and now my heart had stopped it's pounding and sat, simply, stalled while I continued to scream at her, beg her, plead with every face she had ever shown me to please...oh Goddess please...please...

And then Gavin became real, and we waited breathlessly for her breaths to begin. In that awful, waiting silence Green gave a cry, an anguished, agonized cry, as though he'd just lifted a weight that had ripped his intestines open with its dark-matter mass and as the cry began to echo off the canyon beyond, Cory's chest heaved, gulped, expanded in a giant shudder and Nicky and I collapsed, weeping on top of her.

She looked up at Green, from the tangle of arms around her, and he was touching her face with pale, shaking hands, and then her eyes widened and she screamed at the vampires.

I hadn't even thought of the vampires as gold touched the sky.

Her head bobbed drunkenly then, and her eyes started to wander and behind her, Renny started to lick the back of her neck and her hair, leaving it in an amazing tangle.

"Renny, you bitch, I'll be damned if I don't get to be a bridesmaid," she said succinctly, and then collapsed within our arms, while Green toppled to his side and got quietly sick in the grass.

Nicky reluctantly let her go while Arturo and Mario picked up the boys, and I hauled her limp body into my lap and looked at him with an outrage I couldn't quite get a handle on.

"You lied?" I asked quietly, looking at the man I had known and trusted my entire life. Then, a little louder, "YOU LIED?"

He spat and grimaced and shook his head no. "Not about that," he rasped. His beautiful sunshine hair was coming out of its braid and he passed his hand around his face and pulled tendrils out of his eyes. La Mark was suddenly there with a bottle of water he'd gotten from the car, and Green took it gratefully.

"You didn't lie about believing in her?" Just to make sure. Just to reaffirm that the man I loved more than life hadn't let me down.

"I knew she could do it." He sat back and put his head between his knees, dangling his hands from his thighs and tried to get a hold of the sickness that takes us over when we lie. "But..." His breath actually rattled in his chest. "She...her spirit...she...was trying to get to me—that's how she pushed through the boys—she used me as a goal...and she got there," he gave me a thin memory of a smile, "and there her body was, cold and blue and I thought what we all thought, although I knew it wasn't true..." His voice got rough like fine-grain sandpaper. "And then I could feel her, right? Feel...her?"

I nodded. His accent was back, the faintest of Cockney overtones, the one that recurred when he was the most frightened or angry or sad. Nicky moved next to him and lay his cheek against Green's shoulder, and Green wrapped an arm around his bound lover and took comfort where it was offered.

"Her soul touched mine..." he continued, "and..." a tear of true silver leaked down his cheek. "And it *smelled* like her...and I thought, *sure, I could keep her safe if she was just here, inside my skin.*"

"Oh no..." And now I knew what the lie had been. "And you told her you wanted her to go..."

"And here she is." He reached out and I moved her so he could stroke her face again. He closed his eyes—relief? Love? The pain of both? And tried for another smile—this one came out better, but it was still such a lie he should have gotten sick again. "And here she is," he repeated softly. "And aren't we all glad I lied."

She slept for a solid twelve hours after that.

We decided to keep the boys until she woke up to talk to them. It was probably a horrible, insensitive thing to do to their mother, and damn us all if we

gave a tinker's shit. She had earned the right to see them safe and whole before they left.

We bathed with her before laying her down—she'd been covered in blood and vomit and the sweat-stink of fear, and so had we all. Nicky had needed to leave the shower when he realized how heavily her hair was crusted with blood. He hadn't seen her, really seen, the extent of the injuries she'd had when we'd blurred into the room and found her, standing next to that glowing bubble of triumph and spelling out our enemy's doom with a broken nose, broken cheekbone and probably a cracked skull as well. I knew it was a sight that would haunt me in every restless sleep for the rest of my short and mortal life.

Green slept next to her for the first four hours—he was exhausted to the point that his legs shook when he swung her up out of my arms from the car, but I wouldn't have taken her curled, content, sleeping body from him for anything in the world. I gave him the privacy and the honor of being alone...of lying in the darkened room and listening to the wonder of her breathing and scenting her skin.

Green awoke and stumbled out of bed a little past noon, reaching for a can of trail mix and his computer, in order to make inquiries about the house that Hollow Man had died in, to see if we had to worry about exposure or police investigations or any of the things that haunted a people that shouldn't be. After an hour of poring over the computer, he padded down to Renny's room to wake Max and get a little help, and ordered me to go lay down with my *due'ane*. I had been sitting in the living room, trying to figure out how to knit so I could help her fix Green's beloved sweater. "You need more sleep," I said, trying to focus my eyes on my needles. My mother, who had been the one doing the teaching, reached out gently and took the work from my ungainly hands, then flitted up and kissed my cheek.

"I'll have the sprites wash out the thistles and stains from the rest of the yarn," she murmured, because the sprite we'd sent with Cory had apparently appeared back at the hill after we'd followed her trail back to the cottage and asked for help, and an entire fleet of sprites had gone back to the golf course on Matson and gathered Cory's treasured yarn up into neat little balls and brought them back.

"But will it..." I floundered for words, "Will her touch-magic still be in it?" I asked fuzzily, worried. "If you wash it...will her touch go away?"

Mom laughed—she was a pixie, her laugh tinkled. "Silly boy—I've washed the sweater she's made you ten times—you wear it most of the week. I bet it's still as strong as they day you first wore it." She sobered then, and patted my face like she had when I'd been thirteen and showing up shamed, with a truckload of peaches. "After the sacrifices she's made to keep her family, darling...do you really think that touch-magic can be washed away with a little water and some re-spinning?"

My brush with mortality still haunted both my parents—I could see it sometimes, when danger was near. I shook my head no, watching, fascinated, as the world spun behind bleary eyes.

"You do what your leader tells you, Bracken," Mom said gently. "Go to bed." And I caught her in a hug, careful of her wings. I used to sit at my mother's feet while she read to me, and be mesmerized by the rainbow shimmer, but now all I could think of was that she and my father had been proud of me, so proud, and that nothing they'd said to me in my whole life had hurt me as much as Cory's mother had hurt her when she was a child.

"Go," she murmured, her four-foot pixie body wriggling because I was so much bigger than she was, and I shambled off to bed, slamming my shoulder into the doorframe on the way out from sheer weariness.

I slept soundly, and when I woke up it was dark and Cory awoke enough to snuggle into my arms, and Nicky had joined her and followed her across the bed into the snuggle. I didn't mind—we'd shared very well this last week. I was free-falling off a cliff, he was the first night of spring—I could live very easily knowing my place in her life was assured.

She woke up in the dark only a few moments after I'd lain awake, listening to her breath. The sun was dying from the sky and only the littlest bit of light snuck under the door. She was sandwiched between Nicky and I, and her eyes met mine in such honest relief, such terrible love, that I could hardly blink. Those shadowed, brightening green/brown eyes would never look at anyone else the way they looked at me.

She put her hand on Nicky's hand around her middle, and I could sense her careful—almost panicked—suppression of the disappointment that Green wasn't there. She took Nicky's hand to her lips and kissed it, still looking into my eyes, and he dropped kisses in her hair and clenched into her, shuddering, and I sheltered them both with my big shoulders and my own embrace.

"Green was here for the first few hours," I said carefully.

"How long have I been out?" Her voice was gravel and honey.

"I think the vampires just woke up."

She grunted, then said "Ouch! I think I sprained my brain-chatter op-center."

It was all I could do not to smack her upside the head, but Grace spared me the trouble by bursting in with a tray full of food and mouth full of acerbic scolding.

"What in the fuck do you think you're doing, trying to talk like that after what you did..."

"Were you just *waiting* there with all that food?" she asked, blinking hard and trying to sit up. Her arm went out from under her and she landed awkwardly on the mattress next me like a fish on its side. I sat up fluidly—my sleep had been adequate—and pulled her up next to me, sitting her on my lap. She didn't object, and she and Grace kept talking throughout the procedure.

"Yes," Grace snapped back. "How do you feel?"

"Like someone's scooping out my eye with a melon-baller," Cory returned sourly, reaching up to rub it, and Grace took her hand away and looked. She'd turned on the lamp next to the bed, and I could see now that her right eye was bloodshot and I wondered what else Green had healed during his too-brief sleep next to her.

"Yeah." Grace's voice became, if anything, sharper. "Green said you'd damn near blown out a blood vessel...you stupid, thoughtless, willful..." And now her voice broke, "Blessed, blessed child. Goddammit! My Queen, you can't ever do that again...not even for me. Do you understand?"

Cory grunted, like she was being squeezed too tight and then she thumped my forearm with her fist and I realized that I had been the one doing the squeezing.

"Bracken..." she complained, and then Nicky, who had sat up behind her smacked her upside the head. "*Nicky!*" She glared at all of us, her eyes narrowing. "No. No to all of you. I have no intention of dying and letting you all

down, but I'm not giving up risk to help our people. If I didn't risk anything, *you'd* be dead you big goober," she smacked me on the chest, "And Nicky, you'd be dead or worse, and," she glared at Grace, "the boys would be in hell or worse, and I *am* going to give what I have to give and I *am* going to be a goddamned bridesmaid! Ouch!" She put her hand to her eye then and whimpered and I cradled her head against my chest.

"But maybe some food and rest first, you think my Queen?" I asked dryly.

"Asshole," she murmured, stroking my chest. "Nicky, feed me pie."

"The prime-rib first," Nicky said, sliding off the bed in his boxer shorts and moving to the chair by the bed. "Does this mean the were people are eating well tonight?" We could practically hear him salivating.

Grace was still recovering herself, and she nodded. "There's plenty there for both of you," she said, her voice still broken.

"You haven't seen her eat," Nicky said dryly, and Cory's open eye bulged with indignation, but her mouth was full of cow so she couldn't say anything.

"They're all right, aren't they?" I asked. Steph, Joe and Arturo had snatched the boys up as soon as we'd gotten home, whisking them away to a guest room like a pack of mama-bears, and I was guessing Arturo had spelled them to sleep until we figured out what to tell them and how to get them back to their mother now that there was a state-wide amber alert for them.

"They're fine," she said, a dry laugh forcing its way out. "That man," (Arturo!) "has them playing some insane electronic thing—I'm surprised you haven't heard Graeme shouting from here."

Cory swallowed a giant bite with an audible gulp. "Grace..." She gnawed on her lower lip and sighed, leaning her head against my chest and stroking it for comfort. She didn't even look at Grace as she spoke. "Grace, Gavin...Gavin's..." She grimaced, not liking the word choice given her. "He's wired...he's wired to love men, the same way Arturo's wired to love women—I know that sounds dumb for a little kid, but...he's just wired that way. He's known forever...and his father isn't...he's not a nice man about that sort of thing. You've noticed that Graeme's protective of him, right? Well, there's a good reason and..." Finally, she looked at Grace, heartbreak in her face. "Grace, we're going to need to get that kid and bring him here when he hits puberty, okay? We're going to need

Graeme to have a way to get in touch with us, because Gavin won't, because his whole life he's been taught that if he reaches for anything that makes him happy it's probably wrong. Gavin...when he's sad, he...he's like you!" she blurted. "He holds it all inside his chest...but he's been holding this too long...and if we don't save him, he'll end up as lost as everyone else this hill has saved and..." She was getting upset, her first sign of true, panicky emotion since she woke up. "We can't let that happen," she finished, soft, sob-less tears falling on my bare skin. "But we have to give him back...all we can do is watch him and hope..."

Grace was on her knees, holding her hands, and stroking fevered hair from her hot face. "Oh darling..." she breathed. "I'm the grandma...don't you know by now that's all I *can* do?"

Cory nodded, mutely, and my eyes went to the intricately worked Irish Chain quilt on our bed—it was one of the few things she took from home. I had a sudden thought, about her grandmother whom she had never talked about, ever, and a question I thought I might never ask.

"I'll bring them in, then," Grace said matter-of-factly. "Max is going to take them into the station and say he found them by Scary Tree—it's close enough to the truth. All they remember is that you saved them—they don't know how, but it's the one thing we got from them." She laughed a little. "'Cory's a superhero! She saved us, Grandma!' I told them that superheroes needed their secret identities—I don't think they're going to have any trouble keeping a secret without our help."

"So what's my superhero identity?" Cory asked musingly, and her voice was blurring. She was getting tired—overwhelmingly tired—and she had barely eaten. I met Nicky's eyes and he shoved a bite of potatoes and prime rib in her mouth, and she gave a goofy little laugh around her full mouth. She swallowed. "The only superhero name I can think of sounds like a porn-star's stage name..." Nicky fed her again, and she kept talking through her full mouth. "Orgasmo-chick," She giggled. "Sexual Frenzy..." giggle swallow giggle "Buffy the Boffer..." giggle giggle giggle "The Big Bang!!!" And she collapsed into gales of laughter on my chest while the rest of us looked at her in shocked amusement. We didn't even have to spell her to sleep—her laughter died abruptly, she gave a little hiccup, and then slept for the next six hours, and we had to wait for morning to return Gavin and Graeme to their mother.

Green came back in after Grace went out and told him that she'd fallen

asleep again. He took her off my lap and then nudged me out of my spot with his hip, and sat cradling her, looking exhausted.

"You need more sleep, leader," I said quietly, and he gave me a wry smile.

"I agree. But Hallow's here. He wants to thank her and..."

"She needs more healing," I told him frankly, knowing it would be the one thing that would keep him here, in this quiet haven of soft yellow light and comfortable things, while he rested.

He grunted, his head tipped back against the headboard, his eyes half-closed already. "Tell Hallow I'll be out in a few..." he murmured.

Nicky and I waited until his eyes were closed and his breathing softened, and then I moved her to his side and we both eased him back. He stirred for moment, said, "Just another minute..." Then clutched her to his chest and fell asleep.

"Gods..." Nicky murmured as we walked out the hall. "Sometimes there's benefit to being second banana..." And then he wandered off to his room, hopefully to finish his sleep uninterrupted.

I wandered into the front room to talk to Hallow. He was sitting at the table, playing backgammon with Max, who was responding to the gently probing questions about accommodating his change to a preternatural being with extremely human grunts.

"I understand that the Goddess night was extremely intense," Hallow was saying, "What did you think?"

"I think I just won," Max said without triumph. "Renny, do we have any pie?"

Renny, who was sitting in the chair next to him stood up to get some out of the refrigerator, but Max, running on sheer human panic, beat her to it, practically knocking over his chair in an effort to get the hell away from that table.

"Would you like some pie?" he asked with that bright, false hospitality of a child uncomfortable with an older relative—or a new husband, dealing with an in-law.

"That would be lovely," Hallow said with a straight face and dancing eyes. "Bracken, would you like to join us?"

Not really. "Pie sounds great." I missed cramps and the sweats by inches.

Hallow laughed and pinched the bridge of his nose—a gesture very like Green's. "I'm off duty, people," he complained. "I didn't just drop out of the sky at dark-thirty to psychoanalyze the whole hill."

Oh, well in that case..."I'd love to join you," I said with some genuine relief. "If you don't mind me asking..."

"Why am I here?" We nodded, Max and Renny with full mouths. "To thank you all, of course," he said seriously, "Most especially Green, and your child-Goddess."

"Little Goddess," Max corrected with a swallow.

Hallow shook his head. "You are all so loyal—it's a truly good thing. Just..." he grimaced, "Just don't forget, that even after all of this, she's only two human decades..."

Max made a pained sound and rolled his eyes at his beloved, who had only just turned twenty. Renny pat his thigh and went back to the half of a chocolate-caramel-cream masterpiece on her plate. Grace had been busy this night, cooking her relief and her gratitude into dessert.

"It's not like you're that old either, Max," Hallow added kindly. "Besides...I honestly just came to say thank you. Half the time when we were talking, Lady Cory was trying to console me. I wouldn't let her—I thought she needed to worry more about herself. But..." His fine, handsome face became suddenly grief-stricken, and I realized with a faint sense of shame that thing that Cory had never forgotten—Hallow had suffered a loss much like ours, and we had been so involved in our great adjustment that I wasn't sure if anyone but Green and Cory had given a thought to his well-being. "But..." he repeated, and shrugged. "She exacted justice, she kept her people safe. I'm one of her people, and some of that justice was for me. I just wanted to say thank you, that's all."

"She'll be asleep for a long time," I said, cocking my head to invite him to wait.

"I don't mind waiting," he said, and Max turned miserable eyes to me. He

obviously didn't want to play with the grown-ups anymore.

"Would you like to play chess?" I asked hopefully.

"I'd love to—but I refuse to let you win," he said with some amusement.

"Damn Adrian," I muttered, running back to his old room to get a board, but I said it without heat. He had intended to live forever; I might never have known how badly I sucked at the game I had loved learning at his feet. But then, if he hadn't died, I might never have improved, either. I was so busy musing on this that I almost tripped over my own feet when I threw open the door. The light was on and Kyle was sitting on the bed, listening to music on a set of tiny headphones. I froze in the doorway, not sure who was more stunned, Kyle or myself.

"I'm sorry," I said after a moment, swallowing past the pain of seeing another person in this bright yellow room that I had loved. "I didn't realize..."

"Marcus set me up here..." he said apologetically, scrambling up and swinging his legs over the bed," he said that no one was using this room right now..."

I shook my head and swallowed again. "No," I murmured. "No one's using it...it's..." Goddess, I had known this was coming. "It's fine," I said at last, meaning it. "Only this is where we keep the chess boards..."

Kyle's face, that stoic, still human mask that hid a pain that I was too acquainted with, suddenly lit up. "That is an *awesome* collection," he said enthusiastically. "I'd love to play on some of those—that civil war one is soooooo coool..." Then his face fell, as though he suddenly remembered that he was grieving, and a stranger here. "But I'm not that good anyway," he mumbled, looking away.

"Well go ahead and get it out," I invited, thinking that's what Cory would do. "Uhm...Hallow and I were going to start a game—you can play loser."

"Don't you mean winner?"

I shook my head glumly thinking that Hallow probably learned how to play from Green—I got the feeling they were of an age, with a history. "No, no...the only way we'll all get to play is if one of us plays the loser."

Kyle laughed a tiny bit, just enough to make me think that, like the rest of us, he'd survive. "If you're sure?"

"Yeah. No problem whatsoever."

He got the board and went ahead of me, and I glanced behind me before I shut off the light.

Adrian, when will you love me?

Forever and ever.

A little before Cory woke up, Green strode purposefully into the living room, and set himself up at his computer. Hallow and I looked at each other with questions in our eyes.

"Shouldn't she be up soon?" I asked—I'd been expecting her up for a couple of hours. We'd been playing marathon chess, so the time went by fast, but it was nearing two in the morning.

"I would imagine so." He kept his voice expressionless, and he was staring at his computer in the same way Cory had been staring at her knitting the morning after Davy died.

I know my eyebrows shot up to my hairline, and Hallow's did the same. "She will be aching to have you there," I said baldly.

"She's not even awake yet," he protested, and I was immediately earlobe deep in the final realization of why Cory needed more than one lover.

"You're avoiding her," I accused, and he gave me an "Oh please" look that should have made him sick but because he hadn't spoken, I think the curse grazed him by a hair's breadth.

Hallow tapped my shoulder and looked up at the doorway, where our beloved stood, barefoot, wearing a white T-shirt that could have been either one of ours—in fact, she'd been wearing our clothes so often, I think we'd been sharing each other's shirts as often as she'd been wearing them. She looked tired, and her eye was still a little red, and her hair was a wild, tangled disaster floating around her pale face, but she had a mutinous cant to her jaw and that knit little pucker between her eyes. She took a long look at Green, oblivious in front of his laptop, and nodded, then changed her tack just a little.

I don't know how she made that pad to the couch sexy, but she did. She reached from behind the high-back (Hallow and I could see that when she bent at the waist, her feet came off the floor) and wrapped her arms around her beloved's shoulders and bit him, sharply on the ear.

"Beloved..." he protested, and she reached out (her little feet kicking furiously) and snapped the lap-top shut over Green's loud protest.

"You lied," she said clearly, and Green's shoulders slumped, and his chin lowered to his chest, and for an awful, dreadful moment, he looked as defeated as I'd ever seen him.

"I'm so terribly sorry," he said rawly, and she moved her head around and nipped his other ear.

"It's a good thing you did," she replied matter-of-factly, "because with what I want to do to you, do you know what would happen if I tried it while I was floating around your body as some sort of disembodied soul?" She bent over to his ear again and whispered something obscene, absurd, and so funny that Hallow and I choked on our own tongues, and Green burst into the startled laughter of the naughty little boy. He turned then, and looked her in the eyes for the first time since Scary Tree.

"You think so?" he asked, his chest still shaking with laughter. His eyes, though, were sober, and yearning, and so terribly in love.

"I don't know." She smiled wickedly. "Do you want to try it with me on the outside of your body and see?"

He became a blur as he vaulted over the couch and then swept her down the hallway.

"Oh damn," I sighed, watching them disappear into our room and feeling the last couple of days catching up with me. "Where am I going to sleep?"

Hallow looked in the direction they had disappeared, the last traces of trouble on his clear brow and lake-blue eyes. "I would imagine," he said thoughtfully, "That give it another game of chess—two games at the most—and you can sleep with them in your own bed."

Kyle raised his eyes to me and shrugged. Worth a try.

It took two games.

The stillness of the pre-gray dawn had settled over the house—only the vampires were still awake, but their day was winding down too. Hallow had opted to stay over—I'd offered him a guest room, and I'm sure he was asleep almost as soon as the door closed behind me. I could hear the pad of my sidhe-quiet feet on the carpet as I opened the door to mine and Cory's room.

Green's back was to me, and his face was buried in her chest. Her arms were wrapped protectively around him. She was still stroking his hair, although I could see from the doorway that he was fast asleep. Her T-shirt glinted silver in the light that came in from the hall: elfin tears, saturating the fabric.

Her chin lifted as I opened the door, and she nodded to me, her eyes limpid in the darkness when I closed out the hall light behind me. I realized that the room was still too permeated with our night for me to tell if they had been making love. I hoped they had—goddess, how I hoped they had. Green needed to be loved.

I undressed and wiggled in between the wall and her tiny body, sliding under the sheets behind her and she wriggled back against me, gently pulling Green with her. Her T-shirt had rucked up a little under the covers, and her bottom was bare and smooth and her thighs were damp, and that was a wonder and a comfort to me.

I wrapped my arm around her and she grasped my hand in hers, twining our fingers and putting our hands on the back of Green's head. Together we stroked his hair some more, until his breathing was so completely even we knew nothing could wake him.

"Are you hungry?" I asked into the quiet. "Do you need anything?"

"Mmmm..." she replied, probably meaning she was too sleepy to eat. Then she surprised me. "Yeah," she said. "Tell me about our wedding."

"Hm?"

"Our wedding—you've been planning it when I've been asleep—I have this whole wedding planned, and I don't know what it will be like."

"You want to hear it now?" I leaned in and rubbed the back of her ear with my lips.

"I want..." Her breath blew out, and I could only guess at the heaviness weighing on her. What must it be like, I wondered wretchedly, to hold Green's life in your hands?

"I want hope," she said at last. "I want the hope of peace, of a life with all of us...we're so close, Bracken. We're so close, and I just want to see it..." Her voice wobbled a little, and I kissed the back of her neck and began to speak.

"It will start just before sunset, because I want to see the sun in your hair," I said, thinking about how a late June sunset would make her hair like a halo of quiet flame.

"What day?" she asked, still stroking Green's hair.

"Two days after Litha." And our hands stilled. When she didn't say anything more, I continued. "So the vampires will be strong, and I've talked to Grace and Marcus—when the sun sets they will all zoom up and just 'appear' in the middle of the guests, invisible in the twilight..."

"That'll be awesome..." Quiet laughter in her voice.

"Yes...they're planning to wear dark, washed out greens and purples and blues—it will be like the night coming alive."

"What'll we wear?" The curiosity in her voice was painful.

"You'll wear what I set out for you," I told her primly, laughing in soft falls over her protesting, "Bracken..."

"It will be the color of sunlight," I said when she'd kissed my fingers and asked me nicely. "Not white, not gold or yellow or off-white...it will make your face glow and your eyes look extraordinary," I told her reverently. "But other than that—it's a surprise. And Green will wear the same color..."

"And you?"

"No—I'll wear sort of a chocolate brown/green—it goes, I've checked already."

"Like your eyes..." She sounded amused.

"You like my eyes..."

"Yes, but I've never suspected you of vanity." Her voice was getting blurry

again.

"Hush and let me finish." I disentangled our fingers and stroked her hair back from her face instead. She leaned in to my touch like a drowsy kitten. "Nicky will wear a dark rust color, like his hair. Arturo will officiate, and he can be stark naked if he cares to be, so don't ask."

She giggled a little, but let me continue.

"We'll simply gather together...at the crown of the Goddess grove, by the spring, and it will be...perfect. Your parents will be there, and any other family you have and you'll be wearing the best wedding dress ever, with that purple stuff over your eyes, and they'll think you look..." *like a queen* "like an angel...They'll think you're radiant and lovely and that they've never seen a happier bride, and they won't care how many men are up there with you, they'll just..." *for once* "do what you do, beloved. They'll accept, and they'll love."

"Will the boys be there?"

"Absolutely..." Although I hadn't planned on them at all. "We'll have them escort your family to the crown of the hill."

"What will we say?" Her blurry voice was breaking, just a little.

"Whatever we want, whatever is in our hearts...you'll do most of the talking, of course..."

"In front of all those people?" Yes, this would be hard for her.

"You can't speak a little poetry for your beloveds?" I teased.

"I could sing..." she murmured, so close to sleep I almost couldn't hear her. Then her voice wandered off, still sweet, still in key, but sleepy, syncopated, and right. *"We could live lifetimes...in a single day...no matter what you do, I'll love you anyway...you say you feel lost sometimes. Well I've been lonely too...even in the worst of times...I give my best to you..."*

"That would be perfect..." I hugged her even tighter.

"Tell me more..." she whispered.

And so I did.

CORY

Weaving in Ends

It went almost exactly as Bracken said it would. Elves aren't supposed to be precognitive, or anything like that—maybe it was just because he loved me so much, that he planned everything that would make me happy, and his vision was just that clear.

Bracken, Green and I spent Litha-night itself in mourning, sitting on the crest of the Goddess grove, watching the sun die through the trees and speaking of Adrian. Because Litha was a day of weakness for vampires, we knew his ghost wouldn't be there, and that was good—because the hard thing about having the ghost of your lover hanging out to talk to you when you want him, is that you sometimes forget that he's gone, until you want his touch so badly that not having it is like having him die all over again. So we mourned the first anniversary of Adrian's death, and the next day prepared to celebrate the beginnings of our lives. Kind of poetic, really.

The wedding was perfect, although not quite as perfect as Bracken's vision — nothing ever really goes the way you plan it, right? Nicky's parents hadn't come—no amount of pleading on the parts of any of us would change their minds, and so we had all—Eric included—spent a little part of ourselves serving as a sop to his unspoken sadness. My stupid aunt showed up and was on the verge of getting fried by all of the angry glances for her impertinent questions when Arturo saved us all by brain-wiping her into being quiet and forgetting everything but the fact that it was a beautiful day.

It was beautiful—the trees had grown enough from their inception that you could barely notice that they were really erotic sculptures of Green, Adrian, and I, in the throes of our first encounter. Somehow that made the grove more sensual, the way the curve of Green's neck or the point of Bracken's ears could, in a gilded moment, turn me on more than their bare and sculpted flesh. The sun was leveling across the top of the hill as we all gathered, and an unexpected breeze sprang up. The men looked breathtaking, in such a heart-full way that I cannot describe it. I can tell you what they were wearing, and that Green's eyes looked more green than emeralds and his hair brighter than gold, but I can not tell you the way my heart or the pit of my stomach vibrated when he looked at me where I stood, all nerves in the center of the place I loved most surrounded

by our people.

Bracken was so full of quiet pride that I almost wept, looking at him. Nicky was so shy, so radiating with joy at being included in our little group on top of the hill that I did weep. Green caught the tear on his finger and whispered '*an yaen*' in my ear. It meant 'only one', and he'd only used the word twice, and it was so absurdly perfect for this moment that I shed another, and another, until my throat almost clogged when it was time for me to sing.

But it didn't. And when I was done, there were tears in everybody's eyes.

When the sun set and the vampires joined us in the twilight, the incense of blood magic joined us, and the hill became a place of mystery and joy.

We celebrated until dawn, and the four of us made love until the next dawn, and our hill spent the week sated and saturated with pleasure and wonder. It was truly the most wonderful thing of all—the freedom of balance.

Eventually it ended, but it was a time of perfection. It gave us strength for whatever the big bad world would hold in store for us in the future—like the one-hundred-and-twenty degree day that Bracken and I chose to go to the college to collect everybody's report cards, for example.

July had been hot—hideously hot—all over the country. Toronto reported temperatures in the one-tens, with a devastating humidity, and places like Arizona and New Mexico had atmospheres just south of hell. Sacramento and it's piddly little un-humid one-twenty seemed almost silly to complain about—but the elves all huddled in the temperateness of the hill, and even the vampires barely stirred out of Green's protection, unless it was for a midnight skinny dip in Lake Clementine.

I was all for going to the college alone—or with Renny and Nicky who did fine in the heat, but Bracken insisted on coming, and Nicky was busy with the Avians and Renny and Max were...doing whatever they did when Max wasn't working. (Yes, I have a pretty good idea of what that is—no, I do not need a clear mental picture.)

The sun was already coming off the concrete in murky waves of brilliant ozone when we pulled into the parking lot by the levee—Bracken said he wanted to look at the river on our way out, since I told him I'd be running on the bike path there this year. As a wedding present, Green gave me a smooth and even

running route around his hill. Now, when the elves walked their land, I could run on my little trail, and we could sort of do our things together. It was so cool...and then I felt bad because I hadn't given any of them a wedding present, and Green had laughed.

"What about my sweater, luv?" He wore it every morning—another thing to thank the climate on his magic hill for, because otherwise it wouldn't see the light of day until November.

I flushed. "I didn't really...I mean, after it got unraveled...Bracken's mother and Grace knit most of it back up! It's not really my work," I burst out, trying not to be too upset by this but failing. It had been such a wonderful gesture—they had knit every stitch back up that I had, right to the three (count 'em!) mis-crossed cables in the front—but it felt like when Bracken did my physics homework (which I hadn't let him do after March)—because I personally hadn't finished all of it.

Green's indulgent smile had vanished then, and he'd framed my face in his long-fingered hands. "This bloody sweater led me to you, beloved—you gave up all of that sweat so that I could have you back. If you can't feel the pain of that sacrifice—and how hard you tried to mask it—in every stitch, you're mad. You made it—you had help fixing it—but you had by Goddess better claim your work."

Yeah, well, the argument about wedding presents ended then.

So today, we made the trek from the far parking-lot (where the SUV could at least be in the shade) through the campus to the administration building just to print out everybody's grades at the kiosk, because we were all too impatient to wait for our report cards.

It was already ninety-five degrees outside, and Bracken was visibly wilting, all near seven feet of him, when we were trekking back. This was probably why I only overreacted a little when I saw my physics grade.

"How in the blue fuck did I get a B in physics?" I demanded.

"Apparently you did well on the tests," he said mildly. I looked at him with narrowed eyes, the last fragment from that sleepy conversation filtering behind my eyes.

"So, mighty Kreskin...if you can see our wedding this clearly, can you tell

me if I'm going to pass physics?" I was so tired...so almost... nod...darkness...so close to...

"By the skin of my balls..." he muttered, and I startled a little and woke up.

"Wha?"

"Go to sleep, beloved," he murmured.

"You'd better not do any more of my..."

Apparently he'd willed me to sleep after that, because I don't remember any more of that conversation, and I know there were homework assignments I missed between March and May.

"You *asshole*," I said with feeling. "I told you I wanted an honest grade from that class."

"You got an honest grade," he replied mildly, turning behind him to give me a hand up the levee. There were stairs not far away, but it didn't occur to either of us to use them. "Anyone who could think of physics while trying to figure out how to crash a car into a power-bubble deserves at least a B."

I blushed. "Who told you that?" I knew I'd been bouncing around in everyone's heads that night, but I wasn't aware that my panic-physics had been so widely broadcast.

"Marcus and Green—Green didn't know what that part was all about when it was happening; he thought it was funny." He gave me a final heave, and we stood at the crest of the levee. There was the bike path below us, winding like the rattlesnakes that loved it too, and the low water beyond, gliding insouciantly under the bike-bridge, clothed in green blackberry bushes and cat-tails at its marshy skin.

"Nothing about that night was funny," I said grimly, shivering in horror at my nightmare vision of Bracken, bleeding, *dying* under Grace's hands.

"Marcus thought *that* was," he murmured soothingly, trying to distract me. I wondered if he'd ever understand that the vision of his blood dripping through my power was as awful to me as...well, I guess there were so many times I'd come close to death. He could take his pick. But the distraction worked, because

suddenly I was remembering Marcus on the night of the wedding. His humble, handsome face had been bashful in ambient violet light of the grove, as he lowered his lips to mine in a traditional kiss for the untraditional bride.

"Uhm..." I blushed. Marcus would never say anything to either of us, I knew, but..."Uhm...Marcus, Bracken?"

"Marcus is like Andres," Bracken replied with a small smile, his pond-shadow eyes looking out at the rocks on the far side of the levee. The rocks on our side were, per tradition, painted white and spelling out the name of some fraternity against the plain tan-brown of the river dust. The soil at Green's hill was red, I thought irrelevantly, and then Bracken attended to what I'd said. "If they are to be—if we're to be, and a vampire is to be part of us, it will happen or not happen in it's time." It was too hot to wrap me up in his arms, so he settled with a quick kiss at my temple instead "You should know that by now."

"Mmmm." He was right—Bracken was often right, but I wasn't going to tell him that. "It's pretty isn't it?" I asked instead, sort of surprised. The river was broad in this spot, sliding, gliding, swollen from late snows in early May, moving down from the mountains by Green's hill past this busy, grimy center of concentrated humanity. My land breathed in and out, lived and died, at the fall of the rains and the drink of the sun, but I frequently forgot that the river that bound these drives together lay right at my feet.

"It would be prettier clean," he said sadly, "But, yes...running water is always magic. This is too."

A wind came off the water then—a hot wind, but it dried the sweat off our skin so it was still pleasant. It shook the broad, translucent leaves from the trees above us with the white bark and the cobwebs of plant fur, and we stood for another moment, looking at the tranquil magic of our river.

But it was getting hotter by the second, and I had to get my elf to the safety of his hill, so I was the one who turned to scramble back down the bark and eucalyptus leaf covered levee, knowing he would follow.

"This is a good place," my friend, my beloved, my husband, said as we were trotting slowly back to the car. "It will be good to come back in September."

I smiled at him, grateful. "Yeah—it really will." And we navigated out of

that icon of human learning back to the sanity of Green's hill.

To my readers:

First of all, I'd like to thank you for taking a risk with your money and your time for these relatively unknown books. I'm not exaggerating when I say that knowing I have a small but loyal fan base keeps me writing.

Next, I'd like to ask your forgiveness. No, not for the typos etc.—although I can only shudder to think at what horrors I have left uncorrected in this particular manuscript—but because I'm going to do something mildly mean to those of you who admire Cory and her beautiful lovers. (No, I'm not going to kill them off, I'm still recovering from Adrian, thank you!)

What I am going to do is take a brief hiatus from Cory and her friends in order to write another book.

My older children are of age to want to read mama's books—and as liberal as I may be, sending my 7th grader off to school with a copy of *Vulnerable* in her backpack would feel perilously close to pimping porn, so I'm in the process of writing a book that will be sold on-line in a more adult version, but that can be edited down to a private version more acceptable for the Young Adult audience. And my parents. And my grandparents.

Bitter Moon will be romantic—and have some of the same themes of sacrifice and redemption that you've come to love from the Little Goddess books. For the public version, only the language will be toned down—the genre is high fantasy, and Cory's rather cranky vernacular is only appropriate in a very modern world. The intensity, however, will remain undimmed, and my characters' sense of humor is fully functioning, so hopefully there will be plenty to keep Cory's admirers interested.

Cory will be back in her fourth adventure, *Rampant*, just as soon as time and our budget will allow. In the meantime, *Bitter Moon* will be out next year, and I hope you give it a try. In fact, I hope you love it!

If you'd like to visit me at my blog, a-yarning-to-write.blogspot.com, I'd love to hear from you! In the meantime, may you and yours stay healthy, happy, and powerful.

Goddess Bless!

Amy Lane

[end]

v1.0

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[Scanner's Note: This work was self-published by the author, through iUniverse.com, meaning she paid for her work to be published. I originally wasn't planning on releasing this scan for a while, but unfortunately the ebook suffered from a horrible formatting problem where all of the dialog was mispunctuated in over a thousand places, like: **"I love you." He said.** The first work (which I scanned from the dead tree) didn't suffer this problem, so I assume it is a bug in the ebook publishing software. With that, if you enjoyed this work, please consider purchasing one of the ebooks to support the author, as this work would not normally be available through public library sources.]